Understanding the role of narratives in humanitarian policy change

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Contents

List of boxes, tables and figures

1   Introduction

Power lies at the heart of change (Green, 2016) and change in the international humanitarian sector is no exception. Over the past three decades, the international humanitarian system has been dogged by well-evidenced and systemic failures to appropriately respond to the needs of people caught up in large-scale crises and to safeguard them from exploitation and abuse. In response to calls for change – reinforced by more recent demands to decolonise aid (Paige and Kotsiras, 2021) – the sector has made recurrent commitments to make humanitarian aid more people-centred, accountable and locally led. But despite the ambitious promises, little has changed. Evaluators make exactly the same recommendations on localisation and accountability that they were making 25 years ago (Alexander, 2022). The failure to change the humanitarian model is clear, for instance, in the missed opportunity to support local responders in the Covid-19 pandemic (Konyndyk et al., 2020) or in the response to Russia's war on Ukraine (Stoddard et al., 2022).

Inertia is as much a product of engrained values and beliefs as it is the consequence of bureaucratic and financial constraints. Representations of 'crisis' and 'need', of who is legitimate and competent to respond, play a central role in decisions on where to respond and how, and who should be funded. They are also the manifestation of a wider set of interests and power structures, and the shared history and culture of the sector's dominant actors – large, mainly Western humanitarian organisations and their donors. There is a growing recognition that change can only happen when those actors who wield most power in the system have the political will to change (Saez et al., 2021).

While political will is hard to understand and to measure, one common element in attempts to define it is the ability to change opinions or to collectively contest a set of ideas and legitimise another (Charney, 2009; Hudson et al., 2018). This is not possible without a common understanding of the problem at stake and a common perception of prescribed solutions and their effects (Post et al., 2010). Policy narratives – stories with a purpose – are essential to shaping that common understanding. Human communication has always relied on the constant use of stories to simplify and help make sense of complex issues or ideas. They have also often been used to forge collective identities.

Perhaps more important than the stories themselves is how those stories frame a particular problem or idea. This framing is critical in influencing the beliefs and attitudes that underpin political will. Psychology studies have produced robust evidence of the 'framing effect' (Carpenter, 2018). This tells us that the way an issue or idea is presented – particularly in terms of gains or losses – has a much greater influence on decision-making than facts and figures. For example, those opposed to giving humanitarian aid in the form of cash – rather than in kind – focus on potential losses, such as the risk of cash being diverted or spent on things recipients do not need. While proponents of cash rebut this narrative with evidence on spending patterns, they have also constructed other narratives describing additional benefits such as cost efficiency, greater support to local economies and the agency and dignity of beneficiaries – using evidence where available.

Humanitarian policy narratives are stories constructed and disseminated to shape beliefs and attitudes relating to humanitarian crises and aid, and thereby influence the policies of governments and aid organisations in this area. They particularly seek to influence decisions as to when and where humanitarian aid is needed, who should receive it, who should provide it and how. However, studies on the production of narratives in the humanitarian sector are scarce and have focused on frames and stories used to raise financial donations, rather than to enable or hinder policy change. In this paper we want to initiate a reflection on how the moral frameworks that underpin humanitarian policy narratives shape change in the sector.

Stories have been key to building humanitarianism as a collective ideology, underpinned by the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. While often presented as universal, these guiding principles have a Western origin: the creation and evolution of the Red Cross. Its construction has served to build a collective identity for and provide legitimacy to a relatively small group of mainly international organisations. They in turn have been used to delegitimise others – for instance, donors from outside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; governments of crisis-affected countries; or smaller local aid organisations that might not be willing or able to abide by all principles but can sometimes be more efficient and effective in delivering humanitarian aid.

Narratives are essential to maintaining the discretionary support – both financial and political – that the sector entirely depends on. Humanitarian organisations need to continuously appeal to the generosity of government and private donors with stories foregrounding suffering. They resort to presenting *all* situations in which they operate as 'humanitarian crises', to both support claims of urgency and to prescribe an appropriate response: emergency relief. These fundraising narratives place aid and the giver of aid – the fundraising organisations and their donors – at the centre, perpetuating the perception that people in crises are resourceless, lack agency and rely on the benevolence of 'saviours'. They frame humanitarian aid as a self-contained solution, erasing the complex political, economic, social and environmental factors that underpin them and people's vulnerability to shocks and ignoring other systems through which people seek out what they need.

These narratives are at odds with, and even undermine, policy commitments to make the humanitarian system more people-centred and locally led. They are likely to be a contributing factor to the sector's continued structural inequalities that hinder humanitarian effectiveness. And although humanitarian organisations often claim that they are subject to the whim of politicians and the media to shape dominant narratives, they hold as much if not more sway in framing and upholding the stories the sector tells itself and the public about humanitarian crises and aid. They hold the main responsibility to reshape narratives from ones that serve their funding needs to ones that help the sector transform.

Based on a review of available literature and engagement with experts, this paper provides a foundational basis to a two-year research project by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI on the role of narratives in shaping change in humanitarian policy. Building on research into the role of narratives in other policy fields, we propose a conceptual framework for humanitarian policy narratives

and explore their origins and sources, seeking to understand the interests, purpose and functions behind their construction. We then explain how a master frame of exceptionalism pervades the narration of humanitarian crises, aid and humanitarianism. Finally, we make the case for constructing new shared humanitarian frames, using narratives that better align with policy commitments towards more people-centred and locally led humanitarian action. At a time when the international humanitarian system is being challenged by insufficient resources, stubborn underperformance and questions around its legitimacy, we hope that this project can reveal some ways to help accelerate much-needed changes.

2   Conceptualising humanitarian policy narratives

2.1   The role of narratives in policymaking

Facts rarely speak for themselves – an adage widely understood by those who study politics, psychology or journalism (Mintrom and O'Connor, 2020: 208). Narratives – which can be defined simply as 'stories with a purpose' – are critical to helping people understand information, events and relationships, and to advocate for causes, make decisions, assign meaning and drive change.

In the realm of public policy, narratives refer to 'attempts by actors to develop plausible interpretations of complex phenomena or events' (Boswell et al., 2011: 4). However, understanding is only half the issue. Policy narratives are prescriptive stories 'about who should do what, and how, when and why they should do it in order to address policy dilemmas' (Kaplan, 1986: 770). For everyone involved in public policy, narratives are the central tool to make a claim or argument (Fischer, 2003: 168).

As a means of communicating information, narratives bring order to a disordered world in a manner consistent with human cognition (Cullerton et al., 2022). In so doing, all narratives – at least to some degree and regardless of whether we may personally think they are true or false, or good or bad – cherry-pick pieces of evidence and string them together to support a particular conclusion. An effective and compelling narrative is one that is accessible, which usually means combining these facts with meaningful symbols and values, and using emotion (Boscarino, 2022).

This definition of narratives has much in common with the related frames, which similarly act as mental structures that help humans understand reality (Lakoff, 2006: 25). Certain words, for example, evoke feelings and values that act as a conceptual frame and provide structure to how people understand complex issues – albeit in a way that can be easily manipulated. The work of influential sociologist Erving Goffman also highlighted that frames have a mirror effect where people recognise and absorb them in daily life, but also use them in turn as a 'process of perceiving' reality (Darnton and Kirk, 2011: 68). The term 'framing effect' refers to people's reactions to an issue being mainly a consequence on *how* information is presented to them; 'positive' frames more attuned to people's preconceived feelings and values are more likely to be accepted than 'negative' ones (Carpenter, 2018).[1] Both narratives and frames are useful tools to better understand how people's perspectives and attitudes are formed, and how they can be influenced.

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1   A recent meta-analysis of 237 examples of framing effects found that, on average, framing has a statistically significant effect on citizens – especially their political attitudes and both positive and negative emotions around particular issues (Amsalem and Zoizner, 2022: 233).

There are several methodological frameworks to understand and shape narratives, which share some common features. Many of these have their roots in 'advocacy coalition frameworks' developed in the 1990s (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1994), with Emery Roe first using a 'narrative policy analysis' to identify 'political, rather than technical' barriers to environmental policy reform in California in 1990 (Jones and McBeth, 2010: 335). More recently, narrative analysis has been furthered under the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) of Jones and McBeth (Jungrav-Gieorgica, 2020: 28; see Box 1).

Each of these frameworks tries to identify elements common to several narratives, such as a plot that establishes causal relationships between a cast of characters and a set of events or outcomes. Together, these narrative elements portray a compelling problem, to which a moral of the narrative, a policy prescription or a 'call to action' is presented as a solution. Though labelling actors as 'heroes' and 'villains' appears simplistic, it provides a means to interrogate less obvious features of narratives – for example, the relationship between the narrative and its intended audience.

Narratives have been shown to be more compelling and thus more influential if they contain certain cues, implied interpretations and framings of problems and characters that fit the pre-existing views of the people who hear them (Jamieson and Rivera, 2022: 679). As a result, narratives intended to persuade need to rely on at least some of the same frames that the audience already accepts. Only then can audiences be receptive and persuaded, or new evidence be introduced, through the lens of existing beliefs and knowledge (Cairney and Oliver, 2017; Cullerton et al., 2022: 2).

The study of narratives and the key role they play in fields like psychology, social sciences and public policy has risen in prominence in the 21st century. This trend has been attributed to many factors, but the rise of more assertive identity-based social movements that seek to further the rights of marginalised groups is seen as especially significant. As well as often focusing on people's personal lives and perspectives, another effect of these movements has been to call into question some long-held assumptions around the 'objectivity' of many dominant accounts and narratives in society. This more critical assessment of narratives and processes that claim to profess objectivity could be applied to the humanitarian sector.

Better understanding the role that narratives play in public policy is not just an academic exercise. Surveying and influencing attitudes to key issues is a large industry for good reason, since they almost always 'have material consequences for the effectiveness of policies' (Mintrom and O'Connor, 2020: 206). The centrality of narratives in determining behaviour and policy changes can be easily demonstrated through considering public health successes in issues such as smoking bans, compulsory wearing of seatbelts and HIV/AIDS care and treatment. All of these successes carefully combined supporting evidence with appeals to values in compelling narratives and calls to action.

> ## Box 1   The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF)
>
> The NPF is a theoretical framework that 'specifies common assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses for the study of policy narratives' (Shanahan et al., 2018). Its early applications were in assessing domestic environmental issues and policy processes in the United States (US), with a purpose to 'scientifically understand the relationship between narratives and the policy process' (Jones et al., 2022). The NPF draws on previous scholarship that considers narratives central to public policy but goes further and argues scientific methods of research can be used to better understand how narratives work. It argues that narratives share some broad common structural elements, including heroes, villains, victims and problems, as well as a moral or call to action (Schlaufer et al., 2022: 252; see Table 1). In identifying them, the NPF proposes we can better understand how and why such a narrative was built, what it emphasises and omits, and judge the reasons for its relative success.

Table 1   Narrative elements as defined by the NPF

Narrative element	Description
Character	
• Hero	Individual/entity with a leadership role working to solve the problem
• Ally	Individual/entity lending support to the cause
• Villain	Individual/entity blamed for causing or aggravating the problem
• Victim	Individual/entity harmed as a result of the problem
Problem	An unacceptable situation or issue that requires action
Solution	The desired outcome that promises to resolve the problem
Plot	A story organising actions, linking characters and often asserting a moral

Source: Shanahan et al., 2018: 4

To make a comparative approach possible, using the NPF means accepting a number of assumptions about how people understand the world around them. Primarily, it relies on the idea that although people's perspectives and experiences will vary considerably, shared systems of understanding the world arising from common cultures or beliefs create 'interpretative boundaries'. Effectively, this means there is a large, but not infinite, set of interpretations of events and facts, so broad common narratives can be identified. For example, a shared political ideology can provide a limited set of interpretations on a particular issue among many people taking in information. Rather than a prescriptive methodology, the purpose of the NPF has been to create a foundation from which to explore further questions, and so is an influential framework for the contemporary field of narrative analysis.

2.2   Understanding humanitarian policy narratives

2.2.1   Defining humanitarian policy narratives and their impact on systemic change

Building on Kaplan's definition of policy narratives, we define humanitarian policy narratives as **stories and frames constructed and deployed to shape beliefs, attitudes and ultimately decisions relating to humanitarian crises and humanitarian aid – in particular, to justify why, when and where humanitarian aid is needed, who should deliver it and how, and who should receive it.**

In the humanitarian sector, published work on narratives has a more limited scope than in other policy fields. As scholars have observed, empirical studies on the production of narratives by humanitarian organisations are scarce (Seu and Orgad, 2014). Narratives in the sector have so far usually referred to influencing public attitudes towards individual giving, with polling and surveying used to decide which fundraising frames to pursue for target audiences to be receptive.

Some academic research on humanitarian organisations' communication practices has paid attention to differences in those practices, and the motivations and moral frameworks that underpin messages and images about so-called humanitarian crises have not been extensively analysed. However, most research from the humanitarian sector itself – such as the Narrative Project described in Box 2 – appears to stop at the point of noticing that some disasters, and some victims, attract more visibility and generosity than others.

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Box 2   The Narrative Project

In 2014–2015, a group of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) undertook a research and communications project to counter the increasingly negative debate around international development in the United Kingdom (UK), US, France and Germany, where many media stories were focusing on what did not work or was wasted and where the base of active supporters among the public was shrinking. Using qualitative and quantitative message testing, the project developed insights to help change the international development narrative and broaden the support base. While the project confirmed many insights from previous studies, it also identified an 'undecided' audience that could be swayed and language and messages that could help create positive momentum. Notably, while the project focused on development and poverty reduction, most organisations involved also undertook humanitarian work.

Based on extensive research including narrative audits, focus group discussions and online surveys, the project recommended four key themes that can be used in communications to change public perceptions towards international development (The Narrative Project, 2015):

- **Independence:** The world's poorest people have both the desire and the potential to stand on their own two feet and control their own destinies.
- **Shared values:** People living in the world's most economically deprived areas have the same goals and aspirations as everyone else, and we are morally obliged to support them in reaching their potential.
- **Partnership:** People in 'developing' countries take an active part in making development programmes successful and sustainable.
- **Progress:** There's already a lot that has been achieved and our work is continually leading people out of poverty.

In a sector entirely dependent on voluntary support and discretionary donations from governments and private donors, it is understandable that narratives have focused on making the case for funding. But in doing so, these fundraising narratives have also created – intentionally or not – a particular set of representations of humanitarian crises, of people affected by them and of humanitarianism as a whole. There has been little analysis of the relationship between these representations and the regular and parallel calls for change in the humanitarian system.

These calls for change have been recurring for the past 30 years, regularly triggered by collective failures in the response to highly visible crises. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the response to the displacement that followed prompted soul-searching in the international humanitarian community that continues to this day. In particular, a seminal evaluation of the humanitarian response to the crisis – the 1997 Joint Evaluation of Humanitarian Assistance to Rwanda (JEHAR) – spurred a movement to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian aid. Less than a decade later, the Humanitarian Reform agenda (led by the United Nations (UN)) decried collective failures in the response to the conflict in Darfur and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Significant shortcomings emerged again a few years later in the response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake and Pakistan floods, leading to another UN-led set of reforms: the Transformative Agenda. Following the fragmented response to the Syria crisis and the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, a fresh set of reforms was launched through the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain, which sought to break the silos between humanitarian aid and other forms of crisis response, and again to localise humanitarian aid and improve accountability to affected populations and support for locally led responses. High-profile scandals of sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers in 2018 (Beaumont and Ratcliffe, 2018) led to donors and aid organisations tightening their safeguarding policies.[2]

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2   See, for example 'Safeguarding against sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment (SEAH) in the aid sector' (www.gov.uk/guidance/safeguarding-against-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-and-sexual-harassment-seah-in-the-aid-sector).

In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement triggered calls to decolonise the development and humanitarian sectors, shining a new light on what needed to change. These voices attributed engrained practices and attitudes, as well as the failure of the system to be more people-driven and locally led, to an aid model that reinforces colonial dynamics and is imbued with structural racism in international aid organisations (Paige and Kotsiras, 2021). Since then, the Covid-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine and a resurgence of famine in East Africa have highlighted continued resistance to change. This is not solely a moral failure: with humanitarian funding plateauing (Urquhart et al., 2022) while needs continue to grow, the humanitarian system as it currently operates may likely have reached the limits of its efficacy.

There is a growing recognition that there cannot be further change without addressing the power relationships at the heart of the international humanitarian sector. The dominance of a 'humanitarian club' of large donors and operational agencies (Barnett, 2021) has been blamed for maintaining the status quo in order to preserve their interests. Calls to 'let go' of that power (Bennett et al., 2016) or to radically rebalance the architecture and governance of the humanitarian sector (Saez et al., 2021) have so far not been heeded.

Political will – or the absence thereof – is often blamed for this collective resistance to more radical and systemic change, in the humanitarian sector as in international development (Hudson et al., 2018) or climate action (La Garza, 2022). But while political will is readily used as a rhetorical tool to explain a lack of progress towards agreed policy goals, it is an ambiguous concept that scholars have not managed to define in fewer than 20 pages (Post et al., 2010) and has been described as a 'black box' (Hudson et al., 2018) – nobody really understands how it works to produce desired outcomes.

However, a common thread in the literature points to political will hinging on the ability of individuals and coalitions pushing for change to modify opinions, to 'collectively de-legitimise one set of ideas and legitimise an alternative set' (ibid.). This in turn relies on creating a collective understanding of the problem, and a common representation of what the solution to that problem should be.

To create that common understanding, the humanitarian system has turned to the production of evidence. Ever since the 1997 JEHAR – much later than a similar trend in international development – the humanitarian sector has focused on evidence-based policymaking. Programme evaluations have become the norm and reform agendas have been based on the shortcomings they evidenced. For instance, similar evaluations of large-scale responses to the conflict in Darfur, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2010 Haiti earthquake have been the trigger for the successive reform agendas mentioned above.

However, the realisation that findings and recommendations on localisation and accountability from evaluations dating 25 years ago look almost exactly like those of today's evaluations (Alexander, 2022) confirms that evidence is simply not enough to overcome inertia and bring about structural change. As happens in other policy areas where transformations are required (climate action being arguably the most prominent), stakeholders with powerful interests find compelling ways to legitimise their resistance to change in spite of both evidence and policy commitments.

Scholars have classified climate delay narratives in four broad categories: surrender (change is not possible or too hard); redirect responsibility (others should change first); push for non-transformative solutions (system disruption is not necessary to achieve change); emphasise downsides (change will be more detrimental than beneficial). There are many examples of equivalent delay narratives when it comes to humanitarian policy change, as summarised in Figure 1. For example, it is common for international humanitarian organisations to redirect blame for the slow pace of change towards their donors' policies. The proliferation of beneficiary feedback mechanisms as part of commitments to improve 'participation' has been criticised as a tokenistic solution to a persistent accountability gap requiring more transformative change. Similarly, the slogan 'as local as possible, as international as necessary' that qualifies the commitment to localise humanitarian aid makes room for narratives focusing on the downsides: a supposed incapacity of local organisations to be neutral, to live up to international standards of quality and to manage fiduciary risks, all leading to worse outcomes.

Figure 1   Humanitarian system transformation: delay narratives
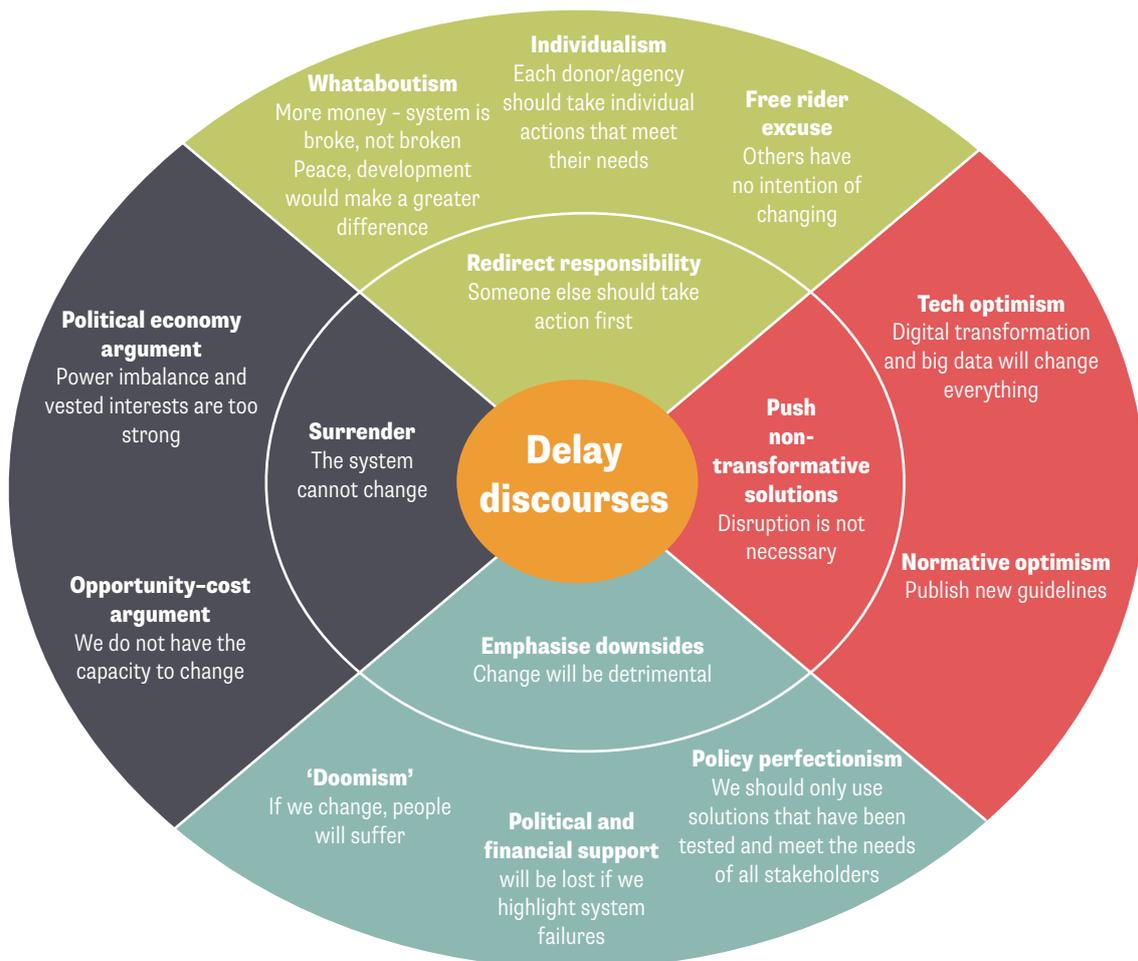
Source: Saez et al., 2021 (adapted from Lamb et al., 2020)

By better understanding narratives and counter-narratives at play in humanitarian policy, advocates for change (so-called policy entrepreneurs)[3] might better understand why, despite all the evidence and policy commitments, change has been so slow and limited. They can explore how modifying narratives, using evidence to support that process, might create greater political will for change (Figure 2).

Figure 2   Using evidence to create political will for change

| Policy entrepreneurs identify a needed change | Gather evidence | Create narratives based on evidence | Generate political will for change |

2.2.2   Origins – how narratives relate to 'humanitarian cultures'

This sub-section introduces some of the sources and key actors involved in creating and perpetuating humanitarian policy narratives. Though the narratives themselves share structural elements with those of climate action and development, there are also unique aspects of the humanitarian sector, its histories and cultures that influence how they are understood and their impact on perceptions. At its broadest level of analysis, tools like the Narrative Policy Framework consider 'macro'-level narratives that condition and permeate entire groups of institutions and cultures. For a good example in the humanitarian sector, we need only look to its central founding story – one that continues to exert a strong influence over responses and institutions today, as well as being the origin of other humanitarian policy narratives.

Though many different humanitarianisms have existed, the Red Cross arguably continues to shape a dominant narrative of what humanitarian action is and how it should be carried out. In this narrative, contemporary humanitarianism started with the actions of businessman and activist Henry Dunant and the founding of the Red Cross movement. In 1859, Dunant saw first-hand the suffering of thousands of injured soldiers on the battlefield of Solferino.[4] Appalled by the human cost of war, Dunant advocated

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3   Policy entrepreneurs can be defined as 'energetic actors' – who may be elected officials or heads of interest groups, for example – who are willing to invest time and money to drive policy innovations (Mintrom, 2019).

4   The Battle of Solferino was fought by the armies of France and the Kingdom of Sardinia against Austria on 24 June 1859 in present-day Lombardy. With over 300,000 total combatants, the battle was notable for its scale, and the Franco–Sardinian victory proved pivotal for the eventual unification of Italy.

for the establishment of national organisations to aid the injured, regardless of who the victims were and their allegiance in a conflict. Since then, the Red Cross's principles of neutrality, humanity, impartiality and independence have been adopted by the wider humanitarian sector, including UN agencies, and other international relief organisations, who sit apart from politics and governments and are ready to respond to sudden-onset crises that imperil lives.

Such a narrative of alleviating human suffering without distinction is compelling, straightforward and has a clear moral conviction – qualities that have helped its longevity. But it is important to recognise that rather than spontaneously coming into being in the years immediately following its founding, this dominant narrative was consciously constructed. Arguably it was not until the height of the Cold War that its dominance peaked – even national Red Cross societies did not subscribe to neutrality and supported their country's military causes prior to the Second World War (Slim, 2020). The reasons why this variant of humanitarianism became so central at this time have been written on extensively (Labbé and Daudin, 2015). They range from an active drive from former colonising Western countries to continue to exert influence through 'neutral' humanitarian action in newly independent states, to progressives' more passive disillusionment with leftist authoritarian governments leading to a drive to operate independently (Davey, 2015). Regardless, by the 1990s this dominant narrative was central to how the sector saw itself – the completion of a shift in a 'heroic ideal' from the freedom fighter immersed in politics to the humanitarian worker standing apart from it (Fassin, 2011: 250; Muller, 2013).

As long as this dominant story has existed, there have been alternative narratives on the nature of humanitarian action. Humanitarian history is completely intertwined with the history of political, religious and social movements. The idea that helping those in need with no promise of reward is a virtuous act has arisen many times in history in societies that shared no contact with each other. Islamic, Chinese and many other cultural and legal traditions outside 19th-century western Europe have their own long histories of 'humanitarian' beliefs and practices (Davey and Svoboda, 2014; Krebs, 2014).

Above all, most absent in this traditional 'master narrative' are those on the receiving end of the humanitarian endeavour: inhabitants of states formerly colonised by the same European powers that claimed the exclusive 'humanitarian' mantle. In response, many of the decolonial critiques of Western-dominated humanitarian action focus on its central narrative and its implications, often of the 'disposability' of 'beneficiaries' and the 'dependency and entitlement of interveners' (Rutazibwa, 2019: 66). These critiques argue that narratives justifying external developmental and humanitarian interventions carry much the same underlying rationale as colonialism, and the division between such exploitation and post-colonial cooperation remains blurred and often non-existent (Kothari, 2006).

2.2.3   Sources – who constructs humanitarian policy narratives

Exploring who shapes humanitarian policy narratives reveals a complex ecosystem of institutions and connections. Some voices are undoubtedly louder than others. Politicians and the media have a key role in shaping the publicly facing narratives that drive and block reform and heavily influence practice. Yet these more 'externally facing' actors are only one part of a wider system. Those working within the

humanitarian sector, including international organisations that frequently declare themselves to be neutral, also play an instrumental role in building and maintaining the narratives that influence policy and practice.

International and domestic media in donor countries undoubtedly wields considerable power in its ability to set narratives regarding humanitarian action. It is the primary means by which many donors, like private individuals and taxpayers in major donor countries, receive information on the sector and crises themselves: the media exercises 'the power to define disasters' (Pantti, 2022: 26). The footage of famine victims filmed by journalists in Ethiopia that led to Live Aid remains the common public frame for understanding humanitarian crises almost 40 years after it was taken (The Narrative Project, 2015). In the UK, expected reactions from popular right-wing newspapers like the *Daily Mail* remain a frequently cited concern for lawmakers and civil servants, often acting as a counterbalance to more progressive policymaking in responding to crises.

A recent study shows that most policymakers argue that sudden-onset, national news coverage creates significant pressure on aid bureaucracies to increase funding (Scott et al., 2022). The promises of social media as a naturally more egalitarian space, where user-generated content can challenge these traditional media narratives, have proven ambiguous.[5] In fact, social media is susceptible to reproducing many of the same Western-dominated narratives (Chouliaraki and Vestergaard, 2022: 11). The purposeful and successful conflation of mainstream media with public opinion ensures that the narratives it perpetuates continue to be an important force.

However, even before the advent of social media, dissenting voices questioned the centrality of mainstream news as an unrivalled narrative-setter. The 'CNN effect' (and later the 'Al Jazeera effect') refers to the idea that the growth of rolling, near real-time coverage of humanitarian disasters in the 1990s had the power to galvanise changes in foreign policy and persuade governments to intervene to alleviate human suffering. Conversely, the effect has also been blamed for inducing a 'compassion fatigue' whereby constant coverage of suffering has made the public increasingly indifferent to engaging with and funding responses. Yet some have challenged this assertion, proposing that greater media attention often follows interventions, rather than the other way around, and that larger annual aid allocations to protracted humanitarian crises (such as responses in Syria, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)) are far less susceptible to such pressure than the reactive, emergency funding that tends to make headlines (Franks, 2015; Lee, 2021; Scott et al., 2022).

Today, media coverage and narrative-setting are increasingly intertwined with the communications outputs of humanitarian organisations themselves. The expansion of the public advocacy arms of the largest organisations has coincided with the decline in sales of traditional print media and a general shift away from expensive investigative journalism in many news groups. One impact of this has been an increase in journalists relying more on pre-packaged stories from humanitarian organisations in their

5   In the words of one professional journalist, 'the problem with citizen journalists—just like all us citizens—is that they're incorrigible sensationalists' (Cooper, 2019: 7).

framing of crises and responses, understanding them as 'advocates' that can supplement reporting (Powers, 2018: 16). Such outputs also mean that UN agencies and large INGOs – often working across development and humanitarian response – are directly communicating with the public themselves, with celebrities and social media being used to frame crises and fundraise (Ongenaert and Joye, 2019: 497; Pantti, 2022). At a time when polling in donor countries has revealed unprecedentedly low levels of trust in traditional institutions like government authorities, charities (including humanitarian organisations) retain relatively high levels of public trust, providing legitimacy for narrative-setting (ONS, 2022).

The answer to 'who shapes narratives around humanitarian action' is therefore not a simple one. Even though they usually face higher levels of media scrutiny, large humanitarian organisations are not merely reacting to hostile narratives that undermine their mission. Instead, they have great agency in fostering, generating or challenging narratives. Notably, this is despite agencies' own depiction of themselves, since modern charities 'tend to play down and gloss over the size, shape, scale and sophistication' of their operations (Orgad, 2015: 4).

Promoting the idea of humanitarian organisations as 'outsiders', distant from sources of power, and even 'as weak and vulnerable as those whom they are helping' may be seen as a pragmatic choice (Barnett and Weiss, 2008: 9). However, it is inaccurate when considering narrative-setting, especially with an increasing co-dependence between the largest humanitarian organisations seeking routes for public communication, advocacy and fundraising on one side, and media sources in search of ready-made interpretations and prescriptions seen as authoritative on the other side. Humanitarians, their donors and the media are all active in setting dominant policy narratives.

3   Dominant humanitarian policy narratives

> Facts *never* 'speak for themselves'. They always await the assignment of meaning (Spector, 2020).

The way politicians, the media and humanitarian organisations themselves frame humanitarian aid in their communications is never solely about stating objective facts. They aim – intentionally or otherwise – to construct a collective meaning of what it means to be 'humanitarian', the so-called 'crises' humanitarians are meant to respond to and the 'needs' of people affected by those crises. That construction is not neutral: it is always the expression of the interests of those with the greatest power to shape this narrative. That meaning-making serves a purpose: for governments it might be to justify their humanitarian aid and asylum policies; for humanitarian organisations it is often to raise awareness of suffering in distant places, to call for action and to provide legitimacy for external intervention. While some of these calls might fall under the category of advocacy, a dominant objective is to raise political and financial support for the work of humanitarian organisations.

We detect a 'master frame' of **exceptionalism** across the narratives deployed by the largest humanitarian organisations and their donors through appeals for funding and funding announcements. It conveys the idea that exceptional events ('crises') require self-contained solutions (humanitarian aid) that sit above and outside politics and that only those organisations can and should provide. This master frame is increasingly contested by those who are excluded from it – governments of affected countries, national and local aid groups, international activists – but also by those who argue from within the sector that it is increasingly misaligned with the changes required if the humanitarian system is to deliver on its objectives.

3.1   'Humanitarian crises' as exceptional problems

The context for humanitarian action is often framed collectively as 'humanitarian crisis' or 'emergency'. There is no agreed definition of these phrases across the sector, but a quick look through the websites of a few large humanitarian agencies reveals a focus on singular events or series of events that pose a threat to the health, safety or wellbeing of a large group of people over a wide geographical area (Bloxham, 2022). These events are often labelled further as 'man-made' or 'natural'.

Spector (2020) reminds us that 'crisis' is a label, and that framing an event or situation as a crisis is not a mere description, but actively constructs a reality, with a narrative that allows a claim of urgency (Calhoun, 2004: 17). Active communication (or deliberate lack thereof) about 'crisis' is also 'an assertion of power and an expression of interests' (Boin et al., 2021: 70). Each layer of vocabulary used to describe a crisis contains high levels of complexity, ambiguity and political import to which the humanitarian sector is not immune.

Labelling single events and their impact on people as 'humanitarian crises' (or 'disasters') has been criticised as instrumentalist, because it constructs these events as ringfenced and manageable problems (Tierney, 2007). This 'social imaginary of emergencies' frames such events as 'disconnected from a deeper analysis of the global order that brought them to prominence' (Calhoun, 2004: 16). Such a construction might be practical for fundraising purposes, but it ignores the role of crisis vocabulary in politics. For example, while it might appear simply factual and de-politicised to qualify the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine as a man-made crisis or disaster, this is not perceived as neutral in either Ukraine (where the framing of aggression or invasion dominates) or Russia (where the term 'special military operation' is used to avoid the use of the word 'conflict'). Similarly, the term 'conflict' is often rejected by states fighting an enemy on their own territory – preferring others such a 'counter-insurgency' or 'troubles'.

Using the phrase 'natural disaster' appeals to commonly held cognitive and emotional scripts but hides the political, economic and social factors at play, often over a long period of time. It is now understood that the origins of disasters and their outcomes are never 'natural', as various human actors are complicit in all their phases and aspects, from causes to relief and reconstruction. Declaring an event a 'disaster' or 'catastrophe' or a 'famine' might seem ostensibly descriptive but is in fact full of normative content and therefore with political implications as it portrays events and actors in a particular way and conveys value judgements – notably the implication of failure by the state.

Moreover, labelling crises as 'humanitarian' suggests that humanitarian actors and donors, with help from the media, have the power to choose whose lives ought to be saved and whose suffering should be acted on (Fassin, 2011; Barnett, 2021). This has direct operational implications. For example, the grouping together of food insecurity events in Yemen, northern Nigeria, South Sudan and Somalia in 2017 as 'Four Famines' by UN agencies – despite only a single state within South Sudan actually experiencing a famine at the time – launched a successful campaign of media coverage and appeals for additional funding, though potentially at the expense of other country responses at the time (Scott et al., 2022: 10). As described earlier, the 2022 fundraising appeals for Ukraine by large humanitarian agencies triggered record levels of donations, leading to relief operations mounted by countries that already had strong state and civil society responses (Saez and Bryant, 2022) while the impending famine in the Horn of Africa struggled to make any headlines or receive similar support (Levine and Saez, 2022).

Worryingly, humanitarians also use their power to construct and perpetuate myths about humanitarian crises, using so-called 'magical numbers' (Greenhill, 2010 in Slim, 2022) which then operate as 'social facts'. One example is the long-cited, unsourced figure mentioned in an aid organisation's report that 2 million children were 'killed' in conflicts in the decade from 1986 to 1996, implying that these children were violently killed. No evidence was ever found but the figure was repeatedly requoted across the humanitarian sector well into the 2010s to (mis)characterise the scale of children's violent deaths in war. Similarly, the widely circulated number of up to 90% of people killed in conflict being civilians is not evidenced and is even contradicted in the case of Syria by figures compiled by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (Slim, 2022). These 'social facts' also extend to humanitarian operations themselves: the common portrayal of Yemen as 'the world's worst humanitarian crisis' might have helped represent

it as a dangerous place and justify limits to international staff presence, but its status as a country uniquely dangerous for aid workers is not borne out when compared with data from comparative responses (Vuylsteke, 2021).

The way aid organisations instrumentalise their power to frame humanitarian 'needs' is perhaps the most concerning; it represents people in crises as powerless victims destined to suffer in communities and countries that lack the will and resources to protect their wellbeing. While many of the normative texts that frame international humanitarian action affirm that states have the primary responsibility to respond to the needs of their citizens,[6] that prerogative and the capacity of state systems to respond to events labelled as 'humanitarian crises' are often underplayed, if not ignored, in favour of narratives that describe some countries as simply too weak to manage crises and requiring significant levels of foreign aid and external intervention. For decolonial critiques of the current humanitarian system, such an ahistorical, decontextualised presentation of a discrete 'crisis' helps downplay political causation, and justifies a Western-dominated managerial approach presented as universally applicable (Calhoun, 2004; Rutazibwa, 2019).

The aid system's reaction to Covid-19 is a case in point: in the early days of the pandemic most observers and commentators predicted millions of Covid-related deaths in sub-Saharan Africa, fuelled by a 'single story' narrative (Allouche, 2021) of Africa as a continent 'always in crisis' and therefore an 'inevitable site of epidemic disaster' (Lees et al., 2023). These narratives did not reflect the lived experience of African citizens, and the catastrophic predictions were not realised. However, these global narratives were not without effect: the restrictive governmental measures implemented in response to these predictions were credited as creating and reinforcing 'complex forms of political, economic and social crises' in Sierra Leone, Tanzania and the DRC (ibid.).

Narratives around displacement as crisis – its drivers, who is impacted and appropriate responses – have become especially prominent in mainstream media discourse in the past decade, directly influencing migration policies in the West. The framing of the increase in migration into Europe in the mid-2010s as a distinct 'refugee crisis' by the media, rather than the continuation of patterns of human mobility, has been well documented, often simultaneously accommodating opposing narratives of sympathetic concern for and dehumanising hostility towards arrivals (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017). Climate displacement, too, has also been repeatedly presented as a new and distinct threat, rather than a continuation of existing migration patterns dominated by internal, rather than cross-border, displacement (Sturridge and Holloway, 2022).

When it comes to individuals 'in a crisis', there is still a general prevalence of negative narratives to depict 'need' rather than a focus on the rights and agency of people affected. A recent examination of NGO appeals found three motifs of 'victims' related to the type of mandate: for NGOs focusing on aid, desperation dominated, while NGOs focusing on advocacy and activism used determination

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6   Article 4 of UN Security Council resolution 46/182 'Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations'.

and defiance respectively (Budabin et al., 2017: 6). A 2022 study of the UN Refugee Agency's media strategies similarly found that the agency predominantly used 'pity-based' discursive strategies and portrayed displaced persons as 'anonymised, passive, victimised and/or voiceless masses' (Ongenaert et al., 2022: 21).

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2017) has highlighted how some humanitarian campaigns present the displaced as 'worthy', partly in response to negative media coverage: a delicate balance of vulnerable, suffering, grateful, 'appropriately resourceful' and ready to 'positively contribute' to their host economy – traits that also implicitly suggest that such people, like the 'crises' from which they come, are also free from politics. But regardless of whether these portrayals are superficially positive or negative, depictions of crisis victims tend to downplay the agency and determination of affected people in the narratives they present – a feature especially striking when considering, for example, how the opposite tends to be true in the depiction of people living with illnesses in fundraising campaigns for cancer or heart disease charities working in donor countries (DuBois, 2018).

There are many features of narratives that work to show humanitarian crises as distinct, ringfenced events. Among them is reinforcing a constant sense of short-term, reactive urgency, making it little wonder that reform agendas that take a wider, longer-term view of human needs (such as advocacy for greater integration of crisis response with development and peacebuilding processes, or anticipatory action) have struggled to gain prominence beyond policy circles. Efforts to broaden the scope of humanitarian responses, such as into education provision, were also initially met with resistance by those concerned with a 'mission creep'. But perhaps above all, these narratives present a straightforward, compelling solution to the stated problem: humanitarian aid, represented in ways that isolate it from other types of intervention.

3.2   'Humanitarian aid' as a ringfenced solution

'There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian crises' is a well-rehearsed mantra in the humanitarian sector (Scott-Smith, 2016). First coined by UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata in the 1990s, it remains extremely popular among humanitarians because it encapsulates how humanitarian aid, on its own, cannot solve the root causes of crises. Ogata's intention was to highlight the political causes of crises and the need to engage with them. In a similar way, the concepts of 'durable solutions' for long-term refugees or the 'resilience' agenda point to the need to adopt approaches that go beyond humanitarian aid to tackle root causes.

Yet, paradoxically, framing situations as 'humanitarian' crises presents the range of available responses as limited to humanitarian aid, and more specifically, to short-term relief. Fundraising appeals – be they emergency ones or the regular, annual cycle of inter-agency appeals – perpetuate the idea that an emergency aid model is the right way to respond to these situations. Similarly, presenting people as 'people in need' perpetuates the idea that they need to be saved through the charitable giving of aid rather than political solidarity to resist or resolve root causes.

Fundraising is the main driver of framing strategies in humanitarian communications. Humanitarian organisations, in the main, construct narratives aimed first and foremost at raising funds. This has a distorting effect when it comes to framing solutions to crises, which is compounded by the close relationships between aid agencies and international jounalists. That framing usually emphasises lifesaving donations provided by donors, through aid organisations with noble intentions, to deserving beneficiaries. This frame is deemed to have more chances of success when fundraising than more political frames of state and multilateral responsibility because 'it offers a seductive simplicity, suggests no grand commitment, and allows a new generation to find solidarity not in ideas of progress but rather in projects of moral urgency and caretaking' (Barnett and Weiss, 2008: 6).

The dependence of the 'victim' on the actions of the donor is a dominant feature. As Mauss (in Kowalski, 2011) expounded, the humanitarian aid 'object' (food, water, shelter, medical care) reveals the images that the recipient is meant to invoke in the imagination of the donor: people that are hungry, thirsty, sick and in pain. The donor is made to believe that the shared product will make an indelible impact on the life of the recipient who, at a distance, is in no position to challenge such notions (Budabin et al., 2017: 5). This leads to narratives that appeal to indignation, guilt and compassion rather than solidarity.

The unequal nature of compassion, in which one party must give and the other receive, reinforces existing power asymmetries and colonial legacies. Compassion in the public space is always directed from above to below, from the powerful to the weak, to those who can be constituted as victims of an overwhelming fate. The humanitarian sector is 'a government of precarious lives' in the strongest sense of the word: lives defined not in the absolute of a condition but in relation to those who have power over them (Fassin, 2011: 4).

The focus on 'victims' is not limited to individual giving. Evidence suggests that narratives of 'blameless loss' (presenting people's suffering and deprivation as not being their fault) have been critical to the success of claims for government funds for disaster relief in the US, for instance. Victims of 'natural' disasters appear worthier of generosity than victims of political conflicts (Pantti, 2022: 29). In the same way, news media prefers innocent casualties and 'unpredictable mortality' (Seaton, 1999).

Nevertheless, humanitarian fundraising narratives have evolved since the 'shock' tactics that used pictures of naked and emaciated children, commonly seen between the 1960s and 1990s. These campaigns established a relationship between the Western spectator and the distant suffering other that is anchored in a racialised 'colonial gaze', and which continues to place the potential donor at the centre, and presents victims as passive, vulnerable and inferior (Rejali, 2020). This relationship of distance and the shock effect of circulating these narratives and images in affluent and safe societies operate as a moralising force using 'guilt, shame and indignation' in order to compel people to give (adapted from Cohen, 2001: 214 in Chouliaraki, 2010: 6).

Shock tactics were joined by more 'positive' appeals that personalise sufferers by focusing on the life stories of specific individuals and singularising donors by addressing each one as a person who can

make a concrete contribution to the life of the sufferer. These summon emotions of 'empathy, tender-heartedness and gratitude' and use a moralising function of 'sympathetic equilibrium' between the emotions of the sufferer and the potential donor (Chouliaraki, 2010: 8). Contemporary humanitarian appeals blend these two tactics. The latest Syria earthquake appeal by Unicef in the UK, for example, urges potential donors to 'donate and help protect a Syrian child' (with a picture of a Syrian child looking straight into the camera) and specifically to give £50 to 'help set up a child-friendly space, where children can play and learn in a safe space' (Unicef, 2023).

In addition, some so-called 'post-humanitarian' appeals have sought to remove sentimentalist arguments and imagery and instead emphasise individual judgement and brand recognition. Oxfam's call to 'Be Humankind' launched in 2008 is arguably an example of this, focusing as it does on the relationship between the potential donor and the organisation being a trusted channel to address an amorphous group of crises (Oxfam GB, 2008). Chouliaraki (2010) uses examples from the World Food Programme (WFP) and a 'No Food Diet' campaign to highlight the often irreverent tone of such campaigns. Madianou (2012) adds 'Kony 2012' as a further example that especially centres digital activism. For all of these examples, however, the focus remains firmly on the donor and their agency rather than that of any recipient of aid, centring the power of individual rather than collective action in making a difference in the lives of others.

Efforts to put donors and their agency at the centre often translate into narratives that appeal to populist beliefs and attitudes – for instance the framing of overseas aid, including humanitarian aid, as being 'in the national interest'. Touching on a topic that dominates domestic political debates in Western countries, one such narrative is that humanitarian funding should increase because humanitarian aid helps reduce migration to wealthy countries. At their worst, humanitarian organisations directly feed this narrative despite the absence of evidence to prove or even illustrate it. In a recent spat on Twitter between billionaire Elon Musk and WFP Executive Director David Beasley about media reports that WFP was appealing for $6 billion 'to solve world hunger', which Musk mocked, Beasley said '$6B will not solve world hunger, but it WILL prevent geopolitical instability, mass migration and save 42 million people on the brink of starvation',[7] without backing his claim with evidence and in contradiction to the 'humanitarian crises have no humanitarian solutions' mantra.

These frames help some donor governments justify providing humanitarian aid while at the same time pursuing restrictive – and increasingly repressive – immigration and asylum policies. Underlying racism in such narratives was laid bare at the start of the Ukraine war, with Western journalists and commentators describing 'European people with blue eyes' from a 'relatively civilised' country that is 'not Iraq or Afghanistan' being killed and displaced (White, 2022). Such framing was reflected in reality, in the form of both discrimination against non-white people fleeing Ukraine and stark differences in the generosity of European protection regimes catering to Ukrainians and to other nationalities (Su, 2022).

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7   See https://twitter.com/WFPChief/status/1454883966071230472?s=20.

Such debates around racism add further urgency to calls to 'decolonise' many of the dominant practices, language and imagery used in humanitarian appeals, which have only grown in prominence. The sector's public-facing response to these calls can be seen in announcements including Comic Relief ending British celebrity-fronted promotional films of Africa (Waterson, 2020), or Médecins Sans Frontières Norway's commitment to address a 'harmful legacy of using white saviour images' in campaigns (MSF, 2022). Whether the tension between these narratives of necessary reform and those relied on to effectively fundraise over decades can be reconciled is increasingly looking like a considerable challenge for the international humanitarian sector.

3.3   'Humanitarianism' as an exclusive identity

In 2019 Pia Klemp, the captain of NGO search-and-rescue vessels that helped stranded migrants in the Mediterranean in defiance of Italian authorities, refused a medal from the City of Paris. She used this refusal to protest against the treatment of homeless migrants in the French capital. She also said: 'I'm not a humanitarian; I am not there to "aid". [...] I stand with you in solidarity. [...] We do not need authorities deciding about who is a "hero" and who is "illegal"' (Butterly, 2019). In doing so, she rejected 'humanitarianism' as an identity frame, because of the meaning commonly assigned to it (see Chapter 2 on humanitarian 'cultures'): Western (mainly white) 'heroes' providing relief to distant, helpless and innocent strangers (FundsforNGOs, 2019).

Like 'humanitarian crisis' and 'humanitarian aid', 'humanitarian' as an identity is a label that has been constructed for a purpose: conferring a status and a legitimacy that are seen as essential to the ability to operate in foreign countries and to access donor funding. Because in its simplest sense humanitarianism is defined by the mere act of giving, the label is generic enough to be appropriated by a broad range of actors. It is little wonder, then, that there has always been a struggle over its definition. Attempts to codify and ringfence it have been identified since the end of the Cold War and the rapid growth of the international humanitarian sector.

Until the end of the 1980s the role of defining the aims and norms of humanitarianism was broadly left to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Red Cross Movement. This changed with the adoption of UN norms, principles, codes, standards and coordination methods to regulate the expanding and increasingly uncoordinated set of UN and NGOs managing ever-larger resources from Western governments. Within those UN norms,[8] humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence have been adopted as core principles across the system to both define what humanitarianism is and to confer legitimacy in order to access populations 'in need'. Common standards, such as the SPHERE standards, define thresholds of quality and have contributed to humanitarianism being considered as a professional 'field' (Krause, 2014).

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8   In particular, UN Security Council Resolution 46/182 'Strengthening of the Coordination of Emergency Humanitarian Assistance of the United Nations'.

While this system-wide normative process has helped the formal humanitarian sector navigate systemic failures in places like Rwanda, Darfur, Haiti and Sri Lanka, it has also allowed the most powerful states and international organisations to regulate who and what qualifies as humanitarian, helping the consolidation of what Barnett (2021) calls a 'Humanitarian Club' – an elite that operates as both a network and an oligopoly. Principles and standards presented as rigid and universal are in fact malleable enough for organisations with very different mandates and cultures to claim to abide by them and obtain the humanitarian label and thus membership of the club.

'Humanitarianism' as a label is therefore used to establish and maintain 'durable inequalities', mainly between international organisations and those based in countries 'in crisis', in direct contradiction with narratives that national and local organisations are the first to respond, have stronger local knowledge and better ability to mobilise local resources, and do the bulk of the work throughout the responses (Barnett, 2021). While this can be dismissed as a tactical process of exclusion to preserve the power and interests of international organisations, it also belies a deep-seated belief that Western agencies are simply more competent at serving the interests of people at risk and saving their lives and that a more inclusive system would in sum result in worse outcomes, including lives lost (Barbelet, 2018).

In this sense, the humanitarian principles adopted to codify the humanitarian label confer 'symbolic capital' to international organisations to the detriment of local ones (Barnett, 2021). Such a narrative of exclusion

> rests on the belief that the difference between the two groups is not the type of work that they do, but the principles that underpin that work[9] [...] any actor whose work is not consistent with those principles – however well-intentioned – is not a humanitarian actor, while any actor whose work is consistent with them – however incompetent – is considered a humanitarian actor (Currion, 2018: 3).

Over the past decade, this narrative has increasingly been denounced as hypocritical: 'neutral' humanitarianism is political in many ways, including by pursuing socially transformative goals, by speaking out about violations of human rights and international humanitarian law or by eluding state sovereignty (Bradley, 2022: 1028). Far from being neutral and independent, Western humanitarian agencies are often regarded as an extension of the interventionism of the Western governments who fund them. And while neutrality is often portrayed by international organisations as a tool to safely gain access to populations, it becomes questionable if its application means working with and accepting

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9   The Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles adopted by 42 donor governments state that 'humanitarian action should be guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity, meaning the centrality of saving human lives and alleviating suffering wherever it is found; impartiality, meaning the implementation of actions solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected populations; neutrality, meaning that humanitarian action must not favour any side in an armed conflict or other dispute where such action is carried out; and independence, meaning the autonomy of humanitarian objectives from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented'. See www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/principles-good-practice-of-ghd/principles-good-practice-ghd.html.

the conditions of authoritarian regimes, such as the junta in Myanmar or the Assad regime in Syria, even when they blatantly deny access to certain areas where people are suffering the most (Ohmar, 2021). Some question the value of the 'humanitarian' label if it cannot apply to the 1,700 new local aid groups set up in the first three months of the war in Ukraine, because they are part of politico-military resistance networks (Slim, 2022).

Prompted by these challenges, there have been some attempts to reflect the very varied forms humanitarianism can take, and to define it as an inclusive identity. Mouradian (2019) uses 'humanitarian resistance' in reference to the relief action carried out illegally or against the will of authorities to save Armenians deported by the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. The actions of the search-and-rescue NGOs Pia Klemp worked for would fall within that definition, as would those of the aid groups working in Calais or Lesbos to support migrants in defiance of bans from the French and Greek authorities. As Slim (2022) argues, humanitarian resistance has a long history rooted in the fight against authoritarian and oppressive regimes. It has considerable moral value because it pursues political justice in addition to responding to the suffering caused by injustice, and because it is intrinsically locally led.

4   Conclusion and beyond: reconstructing humanitarian policy narratives

Narratives are critical to maintaining the financial and political support on which the humanitarian sector depends. Rather than being entirely a product of the news media, the largest international relief organisations hold significant power to construct and sustain such narratives. With the creation and evolution of the Red Cross functioning as a compelling and effective origin story, a master frame that emphasises the exceptionalism of humanitarian crises and of aid providers themselves is consistently used to prescribe particular responses, legitimise a small group of actors and delegitimise others. While voices calling for the decolonisation of the sector have highlighted the harms perpetuated by this dominant narrative, it is also increasingly at odds with the calls and commitments from within the sector for the system to become more radically people-centred and locally led.

International humanitarian organisations and their donors are wrapped up in stories of an elite cadre of Western organisations and heroes selflessly providing aid to helpless and blameless victims of isolated events, for which they must remove themselves from political, economic and social processes. Framing humanitarian action in this way is perceived as the most effective way to raise funding from individuals and governments in the Global North. However, consciously or not, these narratives perpetuate a model centred on large international humanitarian organisations and their donors and delaying much-needed change towards a model characterised by people-centred and locally led humanitarian action.

4.1   Moving away from 'broke not broken': the need for new shared narratives

One delay narrative dominates: that the system is in fact efficient and effective and that its shortcomings stem from a lack of financial resources. This is encapsulated in the remarks of the former UN High Commissioner for Refugees (and current Secretary-General) António Guterres in the run-up to the World Humanitarian Summit: 'The global humanitarian community is not broken, as a whole they are more effective than ever before. But we are financially broke' (Grant, 2015). This 'broke not broken' narrative is underpinned by the continued growth in humanitarian appeals – the annual cycle of appeals described above – presented as an exponential rise in 'humanitarian needs'.

It portrays change as transactional and serves the mutually dependent relationship between aid organisations and their donors. Balancing narratives from donors have mostly focused on 'value for money' (VfM), a phrase that the UK's former Department for International Development converted into a mantra as part of its stated objective to 'maximise the impact of each pound spent to improve poor people's lives' (Valters and Whitty, 2017). VfM became a watchword, partly in response to the high level of political and media scrutiny of UK aid spending (Laws and Valters, 2021). It has permeated the everyday language of British aid institutions and their partners – multilateral organisations, other bilateral agencies, INGOs and private contractors (Eyben et al., 2015: 92).

As part of measuring VfM, monitoring and evaluation processes serve to perpetuate the legitimacy of a ringfenced system of aid provision and the organisations within it. Objectives and targets mutually agreed between humanitarian organisations and donors become proxy for efficiency and effectiveness, with little external scrutiny or representation of those affected. A focus on quantitative measures leads to simplifying and depoliticising complex realities and over-emphasising the activities and direct outputs of the aid provided rather than the outcomes for people's lives.

Implied in the 'broke not broken' narrative is the idea that calling out the system's failures will further reduce financial support for it and have direct negative consequences on the people it is meant to serve. Change needs to come from elsewhere: from states who should work to better protect civilians and meet their citizens' needs, and from development and peace actors who should provide those states with resources. The language of 'nexus' further cements the idea that the humanitarian system, while coordinating and sometimes cooperating with others, should remain ringfenced (while in practice many 'humanitarian' organisations also implement development or peacebuilding programmes). Other neo-cosmetic narratives such as 'self-reliance' 'resilience', 'localisation' or 'participation' appear almost deliberately ineffectual in questioning the status quo.

As much as it is instrumentalised to resist change, the 'humanitarian' master frame might be self-defeating. Calls for a continued increase in funding are no longer 'cutting through' (Urquhart et al., 2022). This is often blamed on 'black swans' such as the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on donors' fiscal space combined with sudden and massive cuts to UK aid. However, the clue could also be in the continued use of emotion-oriented fundraising tactics focusing on the donor–recipient relationship and presenting aid organisations as heroes. These are difficult to maintain over time without generating fatigue, cynicism and suspicion – not only among the public but also among politicians and policymakers.

The system needs new shared frames and narratives that align with policy commitments to change. These should redefine the relationship between donor governments and the public, aid agencies and aid recipients. To do this requires shifting from disempowering narratives of pity and heroism to ones that align with what both affected citizens and the public in donor countries value: independence and agency, equity and shared values, partnership and progress (see The Narrative Project in Box 2). These alternative narratives would focus on helping countries and people continue to help themselves and each other and would be honest about the complexity of providing aid and bringing about change in fragile contexts. They should be reflected by default in humanitarian communications, particularly when appealing for funds from public or private donors.

Changing narratives will not be easy. It requires those who currently wield the power of changing narratives to actively remove themselves from the centre and give at least some power to shape the narrative to other voices. HPG's forthcoming work will explore how that shift could occur. The first step will be to analyse the role of narratives in specific policy change processes in the humanitarian sector as well as within an evolving crisis response. Throughout this work, we will engage with humanitarian agencies, donors and the media to discuss the scope for change and explore concrete ways to reshape humanitarian policy narratives.

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