



Editors' Introduction: Humanity and Solidarity

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Editors' Introduction: Humanity and Solidarity

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This is the second general issue of the *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, following in the wake of two themed issues on Extreme Violence, and Gender and Humanitarianism respectively. It comes at a time when COVID-19 has resulted in rising global inequalities, including those based on gender, and the spectre of famine has returned to public consciousness – for example, in northern Ethiopia. Gender and violence – the latter of a more indirect form – both feature in this issue, as do reflections on what solidarity and humanity may mean in times of global crises and fake news.

COVID-19 has exposed once more the divide between wealthy nations and the rest (Ho and Dascalu, 2020) – the former not necessarily distributed geographically but in relation to gatekeeping of patent rights and vaccine production facilities. While a small number of countries vaccinates all its populations, with some internal vulnerability ranking in most, for the majority of vulnerable populations globally the aspiration of vaccination is remote. Some may be lucky and get some of the crumbs from the COVAX Facility, aimed at providing access to COVID-19 vaccines to all those in need, but vaccine nationalism has become the norm. What would really be needed, that is, to abolish patent rights and allow generic production of all effective vaccines (Acharya and Reddy, 2020), is unlikely to happen. If the COVID-19 pandemic is not the time to treat vaccine formula as a public good, it never will come. Questions about where this state of affairs leaves humanitarian ethics and conceptions of global solidarity should therefore be at the forefront of our minds.

While COVID-19 may be perceived as a new threat – even if, historically, pandemics have been with humankind throughout, famines are often seen as a thing of the past. But over the last decade famines have returned with

a vengeance, the latest reported famine evolving at the time of writing in the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray. Tigray, as many may remember, was also (together with Eritrea, then 1983–85) at the heart of what has been described as the ‘archetypal media famine’ (Moeller, 1999). More than 50 years after Biafra, that saw the birth or acceleration of humanitarian action and a sea change in definitions of what humanitarian action may be, and more than 35 years after the ‘Ethiopian famine’, we still grapple with similar issues around spectacles of suffering, advocacy, political instrumentalisation and conceptions of solidarity (Müller, 2013; Thompson, 2014; Desgrandchamps *et al.*, 2020).

Thus, these new conflicts should not let us forget that longer standing conflicts and the displacements these caused are a current issue of equal importance. The first research article in this issue by Sidhva *et al.* reminds us of the ongoing challenges the war in Syria and the exile of many Syrian population groups in Jordan poses, often exacerbated by ill-advised humanitarian responses. Looking at the various roles Syrian rural and working-class women adopt in exile in Jordan, the article carefully interrogates shifting gender and power dynamics. In doing so it questions the fashionable humanitarian focus on self-reliance and entrepreneurship, as well as youth, but demonstrates how individual and family well-being often relies on rather different parameters. A better understanding among humanitarian actors of what refugee women themselves perceive as valuable lives would be a welcome step in advancing gendered aspirations.

The second research article by Maxwell and Hailey turns to a phenomenon that seems of the past but has returned with vengeance in different forms over the last decade: famine. It ultimately asks the question when and how a famine is being declared – as this is a highly

politicised process – and how to better manage this politicisation. Famines shock to this day and age, and thus awaken political, humanitarian and charitable responses. As Maxwell and Hailey demonstrate, data collection on food insecurity and famine has improved in important ways, not least through the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) – but major obstacles remain. Famine being almost always also a failure of governance, its declaration is not simply based on a technical consensus – and even how such a consensus may be achieved is controversial. This leaves Maxwell and Hailey with the question of how to minimise the influence of political agendas when declaring famine, which for them lies in better independent and rigorous, though not exclusively quantitative, analysis.

The reader may ponder how realistic such a prescription is, as similar to the term genocide, the term famine comes not only with specific connotations of destitution, but a call for action by the international (humanitarian) community that political leaders may always as much resist as welcome (Read, 2016). Data on food insecurity and famine is always more than technical data, as Maxwell and Hailey's six cases demonstrate in clear detail, and needs to be engaged with as such.

The theme of information – or rather, disinformation – is at the centre of the first field report of the issue by Healy and Russell. It traces in minute detail the disinformation campaigns around search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean, focusing on the concrete example of the *MV Aquarius* and the accusation the rescue mission was in fact aiding people smuggling. The report presents the linkages between conspiracy theories, populist – mostly right-wing – movements and their racial hatred aimed at targeting minorities. But it does not stop here, as at the same time those who stand for humanitarian values and try to uphold them become targets. This in effect is an attack on the belief that all lives matter and are worth of being saved. Disinformation campaigns that are now easily spread via social media and other informal networks, the report argues, threaten humanitarian action unless humanitarians develop strategies to treat such campaigns as critical risks to their work and ethical beliefs, and to conceptions of global solidarity.

The second field report by Davidson focuses on the issue of mental health that is often neglected in aid and humanitarian interventions. Ironically, as one of its last acts before being disbanded by the UK government, the Department for International Development (DfID) published what the report regards as a useful theory of change for mental health, with pathways to achieve desired outcomes. While as in any such documents, most of the latter are not new and it may be striking that such strategic guidance only comes that late in the day, it is still

a belated recognition of the deeply intertwined connection between mental health and broader development agendas. It is an important reminder to consider the social determinants of health that not least COVID-19 has exposed once more so clearly. Rather ironically, this comes at a time when not only DfID has ceased to exist, but where the UK more generally has reduced its commitment to global solidarity, as demonstrated by its budget cuts. Thus any transformative potential this theory of change might have had is bound to be diminished.

The issue ends with two reviews of relevant literature focusing on the potential for solidaristic humanitarianism not least in times of evidence-based policymaking, and how this is connected to representations of suffering.

In the first review article, Claire interrogates the potential tensions between advocacy and solidarity, based on the concrete example of an historical reading of *témoignage*. It traces its evolution from 'compassion-soaked' beginnings to a form of resistance against abusive state practices and later its turn towards some form of advocacy, in different ways related to an apolitical focus on compassion that saw affected populations as a mere background or a means to shame important global audiences. In parallel, the turn towards so-called evidence-based advocacy, that seems to leave little room for emotion and compassion, in similar ways has disempowered affected populations and ignored their aspirations. In demonstrating the various forms these real or imagined tensions between reason and emotion have taken in the history of *témoignage*, the article advances the argument that *témoignage* still has the potential to show real solidarity with affected populations and take their own life worlds and aspirations seriously – and in doing so move beyond what has been called the post-humanitarian age where solidarity has become a form of irony (Chouliaraki, 2011).

The second review article, by Lawson, centred around Joël Glasman's recent book *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs: Minimal Humanity*, picks up on the debates about evidence-based action and the numbers which have come to underlie it. Exploring the body of literature that has emerged to critically engage with quantification in the humanitarian sector, Lawson highlights four strands of critique. Firstly, he highlights the implications of quantification for knowledge production raising questions about the definitional and logistical challenges with counting in the humanitarian arena. He argues that it is important to carry out ethnographic and material analyses to understand the fascination with data and information technology. Secondly, drawing in part on the work of Dan Maxwell and others, he argues that it is vital we interrogate the trend to quantification in humanitarian governance, in establishing 'humanitarian problems' which require

intervention. Thirdly, he critiques the ways in which quantification has changed the practices of the sector with the turn to evidence, and in his final section he questions the implication this has for humanitarian meaning, looking at the discursive and communication strategies of humanitarian organisations. In this section, he highlights the research still needing to be done to 'provide a humanitarian-specific account of the meeting of quantification and communication'.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue point to some of the most pressing challenges for the humanitarian sector. They show the need to focus on mental as well as physical health and the need to account for refugees' own aspirations in the design of humanitarian programming. They highlight the various challenges of quantifying humanitarian problems, as well as the opportunities and threats of information and information technologies. And they remind us that humanitarian responses always take place in conditions of failure and political contestation, which requires us to consider carefully what solidarity and humanity mean in those contexts.

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