



## Week 1

### **Humanitarianism & Development: Definitions, Approaches, Debates**

*Week 1 familiarises students with the **definitions & approaches** surrounding both **humanitarianism (1)** & **development (2)**. Conceptually, 'humanitarianism' refers to the humanitarian principles, ideas, and action, as well as to the doctrine according to which a duty of human beings is to struggle to promote the welfare of their fellows. 'Development', for its part, is the process by which economic growth is created, while fostering social progress and positive change. The aim of this introduction is also to give students an overview of the main **debates (3)** underpinning humanitarianism & development.*

#### **1. HUMANITARIANISM: DEFINITIONS & APPROACHES**

▪ The concept of '**humanitarianism**' refers to a very long and rich history, while its definitions have kept expanding through the decades.

### humanitarian

*/ˌ(h)yōō.mənəˈterēən/ adjective*

concerned with or seeking to promote human welfare

*See also: humane, altruistic, civilized*

▪ In time, humanitarianism has become both institutionalised and internationalised – in its practices as much as in its activities.

▪ However, providing an independent, neutral, and fair definition of the concept has proved a challenging task for most scholars.

▪ Humanitarianism is first intimately related to the principle of 'relief' offered to victims of natural disasters &/or conflict, independently

from their origin.

▪ It therefore encompasses 'relief-oriented' actions and actors, which has remained one of its core definitional criteria up to this day.

▪ Viewed as an 'intervention', humanitarianism has also been a source of controversy, often equated by its fiercest detractors with notions of 'colonialism' and 'imperialism'.

▪ Overall, drawing the conceptual contours of the term has been a daunting task raising many discussions & debates within the humanitarian field of study and beyond.

▪ If one is to leave aside considerations of politics and power, the history of humanitarianism is quite fluid.

▪ Past the existence of various, and sometimes highly incompatible, narratives, humanitarianism has had as a common denominator to originate in contestations - both social, political, economic, as well as cultural.

▪ The concept was used for the first time during the



19<sup>th</sup> century, then conceived by its primary advocates as an ideal principally motivated by altruism.

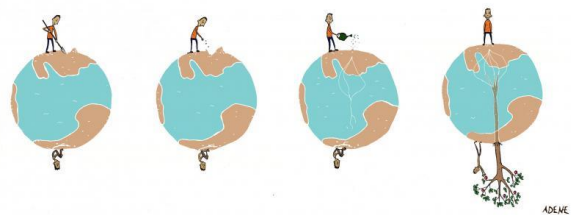
- Other notions are deeply intertwined with humanitarianism, mainly the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, as well as independence.
- All organisations that follow those principles with human relief as their main goal can be unambiguously classified as 'humanitarian'.
- At the same time, one should be careful about viewing in all altruistic acts alleviating human suffering evidence of humanitarian actions.

► **For more information, please consult the ProQuest eBook and additional readings.**

## 2. DEVELOPMENT: DEFINITIONS & APPROACHES



- The concept of '**development**' is particularly hard to define, for it has gone through a complex historical path that has led to a plurality of meanings over time.
- Tracing its conceptual roots allows to understand the deep ambivalence and the shift from solely economic approaches towards agency-based perspectives, which stress the importance of the 'human'.
- The concept is highly disputed and definitions either very general or more specific.
- Development can be understood as a 'process of change', a 'policy', an 'outcome', or a 'discourse'; it can be individual and/or community-based; local, regional, national, and global.
- These differences in content, scale, and measurement all shed light on the diversity of development, which cannot be reduced to labels like 'underdeveloped', 'Third World' or 'Global South' (as opposed to 'Global North').
- The word development itself is relatively recent, finding its origin in capitalism as well as its concomitant dynamics of industrialisation and colonialism.
- After the Second World War, development became the product of the confrontation between capitalism and communism.
- Drawing on decolonisation, development was viewed as a strategy to propel economic growth internationally.
- This explains why the notion is associated with economic theories, modernisation, and dependency.



► **For more information, please consult the ProQuest eBook and additional readings.**

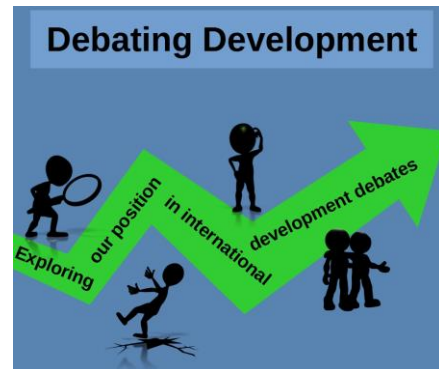
## 3. HUMANITARIANISM & DEVELOPMENT: DEBATES



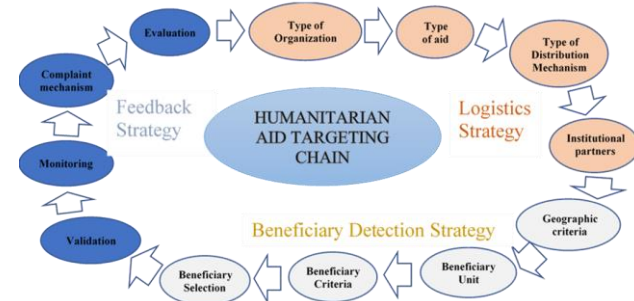
are endangered worldwide.

- As mentioned, one of the essential debates about humanitarianism surrounds its 'borders'.
- In other words where does humanitarianism start, and where does it end?
- Over the decades, a consensus has been built that its ontology consists in saving lives at risk.
- Beyond the act itself, humanitarianism implicates a commitment to delivering relief to those lives that

- In this respect, there are many 'contexts' that make humanitarianism visible, whether these contexts are the outcomes of natural or human events.
- Among them: natural disasters (tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.); and human disasters (war, genocide, ethnic conflict, other forms of organised violence).
- Other key concerns viewed as being 'humanitarian' include human rights violations; poverty; overall lack of medical care or welfare support.
- Still, not all activities with positive human outcomes enter the humanitarian category.
- For example, for-profit multinational corporations which claim to be humanitarian by creating growth, jobs, and income are not 'humanitarian' according to the accepted academic and practical definition.
- A significant part of the discussion therefore relates to the question of 'intentions'.
- Any humanitarian act must involve the intention to save lives and decrease suffering.
- More importantly, any 'humanitarian' should not be expecting anything in return when acting in an altruistic manner towards others.
- Some humanitarian organisations emphasise the notion of 'voluntarism' which means voluntary and unpaid provision of relief.
- They also outline a certain spirit of selflessness and sacrifice among humanitarians, a willingness to accept dangerous missions without compensation as their objective.
- At the same time, the continued professionalisation of humanitarianism has meant the introduction of selfish interests to be competitive and retain skilled staff.



- Humanitarianism has turned into a 'career', meaning the risk of loss of its original guiding ideals and principles.



- As of the 1990s, developmental goals have also been questioned by outcomes that did not necessarily match the good intentions which presided over them.
- Indeed, with increasing wars/conflicts development institutions have been put to the test by many donors questioning their results and intended effects.

► For more information, please consult the ProQuest eBook and additional readings.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

The below-reading materials can be found on ProQuest through your VLE platform (Online Library).

### ProQuest eBook

- Kevin M. Cahill, *History and Hope: The International Humanitarian Reader* (Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 1-25.

### Additional readings

- Dorothea Hilhorst, Classical Humanitarianism and Resilience Humanitarianism: Making Sense of Two Brands of Humanitarian Action (*Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, 2018).
- Maryam Almasifard, Evolving Debates on the Effectiveness of Official Development Assistance (Occasional Paper Series n°51, Southern Voice, 2019).