The Humanitarian Industrial Complex: A Critique of Global Humanitarian Work and the Need for Reforms[†]

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Humanitarianism nowadays seems to be having an identity crisis. We live in a world where wars and conflicts are on the rise and the United Nations (UN) as an institution seems unable to stop the violence. The UN was born in 1945 following the two world wars to address global humanitarian multilateral issues. Years later, in 2006, a Global Humanitarian Platform was created[1] and a decade after that, the World Humanitarian Summit was held in Istanbul in May 2016, which became a pivotal UN moment.[2] Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon then put forward a new Agenda for Humanity, calling on global leaders to stand up for common humanity and reduce humanitarian suffering. In 2019, global humanitarian aid amounted to a $29.6 billion industry, and in the same year a total of 483 humanitarian workers were killed, kidnapped, or wounded, with pandemic and health workers making up 40 per cent of the fatalities.[3] The paper will delve into historical aspects of humanitarian work and also how the work is often skewed in terms of being used to downplay the damages done by empires and their violent politics. In the past decades, the global humanitarian industry has been facing numerous challenges both on a normative level and in practice. This paper will discuss three challenges that the global humanitarian industry faces and the future ahead for the industry.

I Politics in a Nihilistic Age and the Fiction of Humanity

A humanitarian is often described as a person who is involved in or connected with improving people's lives and reducing suffering.[4]Every year, the UN commemorates 19 August as World Humanitarian Day.[5] The origin of modern Western humanitarian work is often traced to the setting up of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1863 by Henry Dunant who saw the suffering in the Battle of Solferino. Dunant also called for the development of international treaties to guarantee the neutrality and protection of those

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1 Agier, 'Humanity as an identity', p. 35.
2 United Nations, '*Agenda for Humanity*', https://www.unocha.org/about-us/agenda-humanity (Last accessed on 25 April 2022)
3 Information available at Aidworkerssecurity.org
4 Cambridge Dictionary, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/humanitarian
5 United Nations, 'World Humanitarian Day', https://www.un.org/en/observances/humanitarian-day (Last accessed on 25 April 2022)

wounded as well as medics and field hospitals. The 1864 Geneva Convention emerged out of Dunant's ideas and in 1901 he received the first Nobel Peace Prize for his work[6]. Various other humanitarian organizations emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially following the two world wars in which nearly 100 million people were killed.

One of the challenges of the humanitarian industry is what Michel Agier calls the creation of 'the fiction of humanity', that emerges out of a humanitarian age which he refers to as a 'world of nameless victims based on the fiction of humanity as an identity and conflating universalism and globalisation'.[7] Agier gives the term 'the hierarchy of misery' with reference to how wars and conflicts around the world have happened due to imposition of a single thought and ideology and there is always the people, the community, the others who face the brunt of skewed balance of power. As for instance, it is the colonization done by the global North which has resulted in exploitation of the global south and the hierarchy of misery continues till today in today's world. According to Agier, 'The right to live in a humanitarian fiction is attributed to a generic human just in so far as he is recognized in a double form as the universal victim, the displaced person, the refugee woman, or the refugee child'.[8]

The 'fiction of humanity', constructs 'humanity as an identity', and strengthens it based on the ideological universalization and organizational globalization which consists of a world of Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs), trucks, cars, tanks, UN agencies, and humanitarian organizations. This is akin to a 'humanitarian government' whose principle of apparatus is a network that takes the shape in the many spaces and is dispersed across the globe.[9] Agier demonstrates that, inside the refugee camps, the refugee is divided into distinct sub-categories of misery. All social conflicts in the camps are also conflicts over the meaning of the words of the humanitarian discourse such as the word 'ethnic' vs 'expatriates', 'westerners', 'refugee', 'vulnerable', 'aid', and 'UN'. There are notions of 'tent chiefs', 'ministers', and 'preachers'.[10]

II The Humanitarian World as a Globalized Apparatus and Humanitarian Projects as the Left Hand of the Empire[11]

The second challenge in the humanitarian world can be attributed to the emergence of a globalized apparatus that uses the label 'humanitarianism'.[12] This apparatus consists of organizations, networks, agents, and financial means distributed across the different countries and crises crossing the world as they herald a 'universal' cause referred to as the 'moving sovereignty' which means a simple implemented by various organizations and agents – people who often are committed and trained in the disciplines of human rights and social and political science or in the profession of health or humanitarian logistics.[13] A single global mobility thus emerges that is regulatory in nature with surveillance

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6 New World Encyclopedia, 'Humanitarian Aid', https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Humanitarian_aid (Last accessed on 25 April 2022)

7 Agier, 'Humanity as an identity'.

8 Ibid. p. 39.

9 Ibid. p. 34.

10 Ibid. p. 42.

11 Agier, 'Humanity as an identity'.

12 Ibid. p. 34.

13 Ibid. p. 33.

administration that affects individual mobility.[14] The globalized apparatus involves not just NGOs but all actors, that is, private, public, government, inter-governmental, NGOs, and UN. In the article, 'Humanity as an identity and its political effects', Michel Agier calls 'Humanitarian Projects as the left hand of the Empire'.[15] According to him, 'The left hand smoothens over the damage wrought by military intervention and striking with one hand and healing with the other'.[16] He also states that as war is constantly brewing, the compassion and the care actually provided by the humanitarian projects serves as a 'politics of containment' of poor countries and of the migratory flows coming in from areas that are politically, sociologically, or ecologically weakened.

In the politics of the nihilistic age, defined by multiple ages which are disconnected from one another and contained in space and time, an identity emerges between the 'whole', represented by the state, institutions of 'international community', or even by the 'world', while on the other hand is 'humanity'. It is only the gathering of the equals that constitutes the space of freedom and the possibility of the public.[17] Scholars Aleinikoff and Zamore thus describe a world that is facing record numbers of persons displaced by conflict and violence where more than 70 million people have been forced from their homes; they also describe an emergence of an international regime of norms and a comprehensive set of practices for the relief of refugees that has developed and is referred to as the 'arc of protection'[18], an international refugee regime that remains fundamentally broken.[19]

III Inequality and Racism Within Humanitarian Industry

The third challenge in the humanitarian industry can be understood from the highly unequal resource allocation and the skewed nature with which the global humanitarian industry operates as for instance the United States provides more than any other nation to global humanitarian relief efforts while it continues to be the top military spender in the world having 800 plus military bases. Besides USA, the nine other top humanitarian donor countries are Canada, the European Union (EU), Germany, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Norway, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.[20] It is to be noted that a dozen international non-governmental organizations control 90 per cent of the total funding of the humanitarian Non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[21]According to Graham Hancock, author of the book, *The lords of poverty*, some 80 per cent of the overall expenditures of the various UN bodies engaged in 'relief and development' work goes towards personnel and related costs. Hancock describes the 'perks' enjoyed by the staffers of 'Development, Inc.', including first-class travel, six-figure salaries, and lavish conferences.[22] Hancock writes that most foreign aid programs are 'designed by foreigners and implemented by foreigners using foreign equipment and foreign markets'. According to Peter Hoffman, humanitarianism is increasingly instrumentalized by donors and belligerents as an orientation between the works of North as sacred and the South as suffering and secondly

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14 Schiller and Salazar, 'Regimes of mobility'.
15 Agier, 'Humanity as an identity'.
16 Ibid. p. 29.
17 Ibid. p. 30.
18 Aleinikoff and Zamore, *The arc of protection*.
19 Ibid.
20 Hartman, 'Top humanitarian'.
21 Agier, 'Humanity as an identity', p. 35.
22 Sherman, 'Lords of poverty'.

what he calls the 'fetish' of the humanitarian aid organization that values the mantle and response more than saving lives.

In his book, *Humanitarianism, war and politics*, Peter Hoffman writes about the 'humanitarian industrial complex'.[23] In a podcast titled 'Critical humanitarianism and the politics of aid work with refugees',[24] Hoffman also states that critical humanitarianism must be seen as a way of understanding the 'international sacrificial order' and that humanitarianism is having an identity crisis. There are challenges that one must address as, for instance, when UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) started in 1967, it was meant to help refugees in Europe only. Now UNHCR runs refugee camps all over the world and the camps themselves have become a problem. Refugee camps have become places of inhuman conditions where people are dehumanized and objectified.[25]

The 'infantilization' of refugee camps, where refugees are often portrayed as people without agency is also one of the concerns. Hoffman states that 'refugees are enormously resilient' and do not want to be infantilized, and he talks about the 'refugee economy', which is becoming a source of growth and describes how the proto-typical camp is disappearing. Hoffman also argues that the responsibility to protect comes as an arm of 'imperialism' and hence the system is as explained above built on hierarchy.

IV Securitization of Humanitarian Work

The fourth challenge that can be identified about the global humanitarian industry is its securitization; for instance, Didier Bigo writes that migration is increasingly interpreted as a security problem. The prism of security analysis is especially important for politicians and others who benefit from this.[26] Competition for budgets and missions and the transformation of technologies uses such tools as computerized data banks, profiling and morphing, electronic phone tapping, and so forth. Didier Bigo calls it the 'Europeanization and the westernization of the logics of control and surveillance of people beyond national policies'.[27] In refugee camps, thus, one can see the paradigm of a humanitarian space that is 'total' and, at least in theory, revels in tension. An apparatus of power that consists of profiling, recording, control, and enclosure that realizes itself locally in a governmental space that does not need 'democracy' in order to operate.[28] The camp then becomes a metaphor and the concrete fulfilment of the exceptional treatment of a human 'waste' that has no voice and no place in the world, a way of managing the undesirables, in which humanitarian government operates, as it were, as a 'subsidiary' form of 'government of the world'.[29] There is a dialectics of hospitality and hostility, of host and hostage.

Jacques Derrida gives a psychological reading of it when he says, 'One can become virtually xenophobic in order to claim the protection of one's own hospitality'.[30] The continued importance of camps, the development of waiting areas on the borders, or the 'internal asylum' areas in the global South are part of a broader political process that

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23 Hoffman and Weiss, *Humanitarianism*.
24 Hoffman, 'Critical humanitarianism'.
25 Ibid.
26 Bigo, 'Security and immigration'.
27 Ibid. p. 64.
28 Ibid. p. 42.
29 Ibid. p. 49.
30 Derrida, *Of hospitality*, p. 53.

secures any position for humanitarian action in the world at large.[31] The camps become the most developed example of the contemporary governmental reality and assume extra-territoriality, relegation and exception.[32]

V Covid-19 Pandemic and Continued Relevance of Humanitarian Work

In view of all this, can one assume the demise of humanitarianism? The following analysis proves otherwise. Today, the total global infection of Covid-19 stands at more than 100 million, and more than 2 million people have died since the pandemic erupted. The virus has also affected the free movement of people within communities and nations. The UN Security Council led by Secretary-General Antonio Gueterres approved UN Resolution 2532, which supported a months-long ceasefire. Some governments have used Covid-19 to justify strict immigration enforcement measures that directly impact the safety and mobility of asylum seekers and refugees seeking protection internationally.[33]

The UNHCR announced on 22 April 2020 that 161 countries from all over the world had fully or partially closed their borders in an attempt to contain the spread of Covid-19.[34] According to Alex Aleinikoff, 'millions of migrant workers have been rendered immobile, unable to work or to continue to send money to families back home. Millions of others have been forced to leave cities for home villages, and countries of destination for countries of origin, as jobs have disappeared'.[35] The International Rescue Committee estimates that there would be over there could be 1 billion infections and that 3.2 million deaths could be seen in 34 fragile nations.[36]

The implementation of lockdowns by many countries from the global North and global South have impacted 1.6 billion informal workers, with women being affected the most.[37] The Covid-19 pandemic echoes the calls of the Grand Bargain, which was launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016. The Grand Bargain is a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organizations who have committed to get more means into the hands of the people in need.[38]

During Covid-19, numerous international and local humanitarian organizations have urged governments to reopen borders for displaced peoples seeking protection across the borders. While governments have used the public health crisis to justify strict immigration enforcement measures that directly impact the safety and security of asylum seekers, humanitarian organizations such as Amnesty International have fought against the abrupt closures and claimed that they directly violated international refugee law. During Covid-19, several indigenous people, women, and marginalized groups also worked for many who were stranded and gave humanitarian relief and support.

Several groups, such as the Danish Refugee Council and the Red Cross, also supported vulnerable populations around the world and provided psychological support including providing access to legal aid, supporting quarantined shelters, and distributing food and other items. Doctors Without Borders also worked to move refugees at high risk from

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31 Agier, 'Humanity as an identity', p. 38.
32 Ibid. p. 38.
33 Ibid. p. 9.
34 Ibid. p. 4.
35 Aleinikoff, 'The fragility'.
36 Kim, et al., *The impact of*.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.

Greece into hotels on the mainland.[39] There is work that still needs to be done and it is critical that organizations work together in order to support one another and address this global issue coherently and strategically.[40]

The UN continues in spite of challenges to be one of the most engaged humanitarian actors, building isolation wards, conducting temperature screening, and providing hygienic kits. The International Organization for Migration and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also initiated a relocation program during Covid-19 to ensure that 49 unaccompanied refugee minors were rehabilitated from Greece to other EU member states such as Portugal and Finland.[41] Another important aspect of the Covid-19 crisis was in the field of education, where 1 billion children were feared to be out of the education system in the developing world. Several agencies of UNICEF worked during the pandemic to ensure that children in refugee and other displaced camps still have access to education. It is critical to recognize the central role of civil society and other relevant local stake holders in addressing the gaps left by national governments and international institutions.[42]

VI The Global Humanitarian Industry Needs Rethinking

The underlying values of humanitarianism we would like to believe are universal and the notions of charity and solidarity with fellow human beings are well rooted in our cultures and belief systems. On the other hand, the formal international humanitarian system and its principles, organizational architecture, and standards, which have their origins in Western Europe and North America and, culturally, in the Western value system, is under scrutiny[43]. Several scholars have reiterated that humanitarian action was born and matured at a time when the West was dominating. This dominance of the West is increasingly being challenged and today's international humanitarian action reveals a rise in 'non-Western' or 'non-traditional' donors and operational actors, which will only increase in the years to come.

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[39] Ibid. p. 18.
[40] Ibid. p. 17.
[41] Ibid. p. 18.
[42] Ibid. p. 29.
[43] Labbé, *Rethinking*.

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