

Redefining the Politics of Humanitarian Protection: Towards a Locally Integrated Approach

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Keywords: Humanitarian Protection, International Law, UNHCR, Refugees, Aid, Geopolitics

Date: 05th November, 2024

The humanitarian protection regime, traditionally grounded in principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, faces significant challenges as it operates within a world of complex political interests and diverse interpretations of international law.

Humanitarian aid, especially when directed at displaced and stateless populations, often becomes intertwined with global political dynamics, turning protective efforts into tools for exerting control, securing economic interests, or reinforcing national agendas.

To overcome the structural limitations of humanitarian protection within the contexts of forced migration and statelessness, there is a need for a more locally integrated approach that can foster resilience and equity in refugee and stateless populations.

Humanitarian protection, while ostensibly universal, is often unevenly applied and shaped by geopolitical factors that determine where aid flows and who receives it. This phenomenon, sometimes described as "selective humanitarianism," reflects the political and economic interests of donor countries and international organizations.

Decisions on aid allocation frequently prioritize regions of strategic interest, which can result in the exclusion or underfunding of vulnerable populations in less politically relevant areas. As argued by Mark Duffield, such selective approaches ultimately render humanitarian efforts as extensions of foreign policy and territorial control.

Humanitarianism then becomes what Didier Fassin calls a tool for managing migration flows, with states exerting influence over which groups receive protection, often in ways that reinforce national security agendas. In conflict zones where multiple state and non-state actors are involved, access to aid is frequently politicized, and the impartiality of humanitarian efforts can be compromised.

As a result, Fiona Terry argues that humanitarian actors find themselves negotiating with local authorities and armed groups for safe passage, making them vulnerable to co-optation by local power structures. This dependence on political entities to ensure access can inadvertently legitimize these actors, even when their agendas may conflict with humanitarian principles.

The use of humanitarian aid as an instrument of foreign policy reflects the limitations of the current international protection regime. By framing aid within national and international policy frameworks, donor countries and organizations often implement agendas that shape how humanitarianism is practiced.

As a result, protection measures risk being subsumed by broader foreign policy strategies, which often prioritize the strategic goals of donor states over the needs of displaced populations. This transformation has been discussed by Giorgio Agamben through the concept of the "state of exception," wherein certain populations are excluded from normal legal protections under the pretence of an emergency or crisis, effectively relegating them to spaces where rights and protections are suspended.

The treatment of displaced populations as "bare life," stripped of political significance. This reflects an operational logic where protection becomes contingent upon the interests of the governing state or international organization.

Humanitarianism, in this context, extends beyond alleviating suffering and it becomes what Giorgio Agamben describes as a mode of governance that manages populations deemed as risks to social order or security. This approach often leads to temporary solutions, such as encampment, that restrict freedom and perpetuate dependency, while failing to address the underlying causes of displacement.

National governments and international organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), play crucial roles in the humanitarian landscape, but their involvement also introduces tensions related to autonomy and service delivery. UNHCR and similar bodies operate under mandates that compel them to cooperate with host countries, yet this cooperation can compromise the autonomy of humanitarian action.

In some cases, national governments impose restrictions on aid distribution or limit access to certain regions to further their own interests. Such conditions create what Michael N. Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss calls a "compliance dilemma" for international organizations, forcing them to navigate between fulfilling their humanitarian mission and adhering to host state policies.

For instance, the principle of non-refoulement, a cornerstone of international refugee protection, is frequently contested by states citing security concerns. In practice, this has led to the repatriation of vulnerable populations to unsafe conditions, undermining the very notion of humanitarian protection.

In regions where governments impose restrictive measures, international organizations may lack the operational capacity to ensure that protection is effectively delivered, and displaced populations may face prolonged statelessness and vulnerability.

One of the core criticisms of the humanitarian protection regime is the gap between its foundational principles and the realities faced on the ground. The principle of neutrality is especially difficult to maintain in complex conflict environments where humanitarian actors must navigate shifting allegiances and interests.

As rightly pointed out by Mary B. Anderson, while neutrality is meant to ensure trust and access to populations in need, it is often perceived as complicity by affected communities, who may view humanitarian actors as unresponsive to local grievances. This disconnect has led to a questioning of the humanitarian sector's accountability to its recipients, as interventions are often designed without substantial input from those directly impacted by displacement.

Moreover, the reliance on top-down, externally driven approaches to humanitarian aid can perpetuate a dependency syndrome, where refugee populations are treated as passive recipients rather than active agents of their own protection. Scholars such as B.S. Chimni has criticized this dynamic, arguing that it reinforces power imbalances between humanitarian providers and recipients, limiting the latter's ability to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives.

Given the challenges faced by the current humanitarian regime, there is a compelling need for a paradigm shift toward locally integrated and community-centred approaches. By incorporating the voices and capacities of displaced populations into the design and implementation of protection measures, humanitarian actors can create more sustainable and responsive frameworks.

Locally integrated approaches prioritize resilience-building and the strengthening of local institutions, which can provide more stable support structures and enhance the autonomy of displaced populations. Empowering local organizations and community leaders can facilitate more nuanced and culturally sensitive responses, better aligned with the needs of displaced populations.

Such approaches encourage displaced individuals to take an active role in their protection, fostering a sense of agency and ownership. Additionally, local integration can reduce dependency on external actors, creating conditions for long-term resilience rather than temporary relief.

The humanitarian protection regime, as it currently operates, faces considerable limitations due to its entanglement with political agendas and its dependency on selective humanitarianism. These issues highlight the need for a re-evaluation of humanitarian principles to align protection efforts more closely with the values they are purportedly meant to uphold.

By advocating for locally integrated, community-centred approaches, humanitarian actors can address some of the systemic gaps within the existing framework and promote a more equitable and accountable protection regime.

Ultimately, a redefined humanitarianism that prioritizes the dignity, autonomy, and agency of displaced populations will be better positioned to meet the complex challenges posed by global displacement. This approach calls for a fundamental shift in how humanitarian actors perceive their role, moving beyond temporary interventions toward long-term, sustainable solutions that prioritize the human rights and agency of displaced populations.

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