
**Context**

**We Observe**
- Great developments in policy-oriented research and action related to HA
- Ongoing interest in the development of knowledge-policy interface (e.g. RAPID by ODI, ALNAP on “complexity”)
- Current process of professionalization of HA: the goal to make the humanitarian sector more coherent, effective and accountable
- Many initiatives to standardize the sector without a conceptual basis

**Overall Goal**

The overall goal is to contribute to improving the quality of humanitarian practices and operational responses. The specific objective is to conceptualize humanitarianism and the main terms used in the humanitarian sector focusing on current and future issues grounded in operational reality.

To achieve these goals, we will produce:
- A scientifically approved and internationally recognized conceptual framework
- A systematic effort to problematize the core concepts of HA

**What We Want To Achieve**

1. Selection and organization of concepts through:
   - A survey to inquire on the importance of concepts for humanitarian professionals and academic networks
   - A content analysis with NVivo (gathering a significant body of documents, e.g. the World Humanitarian Summit reports, existing humanitarian glossaries)
   - Qualitative interviews with key-informants
   - Organization of typologies to disaggregate overarching concepts into types or categories

2. Concept analysis:
   - Original meaning of the concept and how it is used within the humanitarian sector
   - History of the concept in the humanitarian sector and how it has been used by various actors
   - Different or common meanings of the concept from various cultural perspectives and analysis of the cultural implications
   - State of the art of the past and current uses
   - Analysis of current and future operational issues
   - Illustration of the (divergent) uses at operational level
   - List of references

**Demonstration Of The Gap**

28 documents, presenting a compilation of humanitarian terms (glossaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias…), produced by researchers, humanitarian or humanitarian organizations, national agencies and individuals were reviewed.

**Essential Findings:**

- Topics covered relate to HA in a broad sense, including themes such as interventions in armed conflict, refugee, protection of civilian populations, humanitarian law and health medicine, and also terms related to international cooperation and development, peace operations and conflict studies.
- The range of subjects covered varies greatly, and may be restricted to one discipline (e.g. law, medicine) or a thematic area (e.g. refugees, protection, violence).
- The concept selection process and the method for defining the terms was very rarely explained.
- While all documents give a basic definition of the terms chosen, they provide no analysis.
- The definitions vary depending on the field to which terms are applied.
- Scientific references are partially provided in 20 out of 28 documents. Only two of these contain detailed references to scientific articles that could be called (partial) review of the literature.
- 12 documents use the definition with a practical example.
- Only 7 documents use to some extent an “interdisciplinary” perspective.

This analysis clearly points to the lack of a conceptual framework that could inform the argumentation in debates, rationales of actions, analyses and research in the humanitarian sector.

**A Framework To Capture Complexity**

- Complex systems theory includes “how an overall pattern of behaviour is generated, its characteristics, and how it evolves over time and in response to changes in its environment” (Reps, 2012: 26).
- Humanitarian concepts are part of a complex system made of the interactions between the population concerned by HA, humanitarian practitioners, and scholars, acting at different levels of realities, from concrete actions on the ground to reflexive and theoretical thinking, with different perspectives.
- We consider the system (the complex unity and phenomenal character of the whole), the interactions (set of interwoven relations, actions and reactions which collectively create a system), and the organization (the constitutive characters of these interactions as forming, maintaining, and regenerating the system).
- Drawing on multiple (inter)disciplinary, cultural, and sectoral perspectives, we do justice to inherent humanitarian complexity.
- A particular attention is paid to the evolution of concepts over time.

**In A Second Phase**

The direct beneficiaries of this project will include:
- Humanitarian organizations and humanitarian workers (international non-governmental organizations, national non-governmental organizations, international organizations and movements, international/national/local staff)
- Para-humanitarian organizations (think tanks, networks, evaluation units, etc.)
- Organisations, institutions and individuals playing a role in humanitarian action and organisations, working in the humanitarian sector (States, national and local authorities, donors, private sector, journalists, researchers, development and social organisations, etc.)
- Research centres and academic institutions (teachers, students) studying HA

**Who Will Benefit?**

- The analysis of individual concepts will be complemented by in-depth case studies of a set of key operational concepts that are potentially in tension or in strategic complementarity. These case studies will be done in different geographical locations with different organizations (e.g. local and international).
- The operationalization of the concepts and potential challenges and dilemmas will be examined and potential ways to surpass these tensions identified.
- We will examine how the same concepts are operationalized in different current crises.

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**Selected Literature:**