

REZENSION VON DENNIS DIJKZEUL | CAROLIN FUNKE | SOPHIE ZASTROW

## **Joël Glasman | Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs: Minimal Humanity**

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What is the use of history for our understanding of contemporary humanitarian action? In this original and engrossing monograph, Joël Glasman provides a clear answer: a whole lot. Of course, there have been earlier histories of humanitarian action, such as Michael Barnett's 2011 volume *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, which focuses on the main personalities and organizations to explain the origins and evolution of humanitarian action. But Glasman takes a different tack. He explores the evolution of concepts and practices that are now at the core of humanitarian governance. As his title indicates, Glasman focuses especially on needs as the central concept of humanitarian action to illustrate how humanitarian organizations function and influence the local and international politics of humanitarian crises.

Glasman stands in a long tradition of scholars, who have taken a critical view of aid interventions, such as Ferguson (1994), Escobar (1995), Krause (2014), Autesserre (2013) and DeMars and Dijkzeul (2015). In line with these scholars, he argues that the impact of aid differs from its normative goals. By asking how "humanitarian needs" were invented, constructed and quantified, he explains why this is the case. "The way humanitarian agencies compare societies, measure suffering, and aggregate individual pain into universal social categories," such as need, vulnerability, or refugee, is crucial for the commensurability of humanitarian action (p. 1). It does not only shape "humanitarian workers' everyday practices and the chances of those whose survival depends on emergency relief – it has also become an intrinsic part of world politics, and it informs [perceptions] of distant societies" (p. 1).

Glasman shows how the processes of comparing, measuring and aggregating, that make commensurability of needs possible, have come about. He critically reflects, and illustrates with photos, figures and archival material, that needs have become the lowest common denominator of humanity due to their quantification. The resulting minimalist version of humanity now plays "a key role in the legitimation of humanitarian aid" (p. 4). The quantified needs are narrow in what they compare, and set a low bar for satisfaction (p. 15). In other words, quantification of needs makes them universally commensurable, but the more universal, the narrower the understanding of needs has become. Glasman thus focuses on what has

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been left out in the process of quantification and resulted in minimal humanity, in a manner similar to Agamben's concept of bare life.

Glasman builds his argument in six chapters. The first four are conceptual and consider the infrastructure of commensurability: concepts, classification, material tools, and a set of standards. The first chapter provides an impressive overview of different concepts of needs. Starting with an explanation of the changes in the conceptualization of impartiality from Dunant to Pictet, Glasman provides a genealogy of the concepts of need, for which he coins the neologism "needology." The latter is "a large heterogeneous yet interlinked web of institutional and scientific bodies of knowledge, all focused on human needs: Atwater's work on caloric accounting, Rowntree's poverty line, Maslow's theory of motivation, as well as countless administrative, military, and scientific surveys on the needs of the worker, the soldier, the poor, and the sick" (pp. 244–245). All these disparate works share the assumption that needs can be "explored, objectified, compared, and quantified" (p. 245). In particular, Glasman's analysis of Maslow's pyramid shows that it is not so much its empirical foundation, but the ways in which it arranges scientific disciplines – biology, medicine, psychology, creative arts – into a hierarchical model of social organization that explain its popularity. Simultaneously, the needs of people in the Global South were long ignored when quantification of needs was already common in Western Europe. When ultimately the UN demanded statistics from the colonial powers, their subjects were considered to have lower needs than people in the Global North. Ironically, only once the notion of basic needs became popular in the 1960s and 1970s was it possible to make the case for universal standards. But this came at a price: it lowered social expectations of addressing needs and distracted from the struggle for global equality.

In the second chapter, Glasman describes how United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) learned to classify refugees and their needs. He describes how the notion of "needs diffused through the work of UNHCR in Central Africa" and enabled UNHCR to expand its mandate from providing judicial advice to humanitarian relief. Eventually cutting across legal (e.g., protection), economic (e.g., self-sufficiency and integrated projects), and bio-medical needs (e.g., vulnerability), UNHCR orders its target groups into different categories and a sliding scale of needs. This can be seen in the way it categorizes Persons with Special Needs among a refugee population. "Access to refugee camps, tents, food rations, and basic items depends on the categories attached to a refugee's name in UNHCR databanks, identity documents, and ration cards" (p. 68).

The next chapter examines the measurement of **Middle Upper-Arm** Circumference (MUAC) as a conventional indicator of vulnerability. Glasman makes clear that the MUAC tape became a popular, if not standard, technique for measuring malnutrition because of the ease of use of this material tool in making malnutrition comparable, quantifiable, depoliticized, and visible. Most medical and nutritional experts would prefer additional information on context and complementary methods to assess persons suffering from muscle-waning and malnutrition. Moreover, the standards for malnutrition have changed over time, and generally have become lower. This chapter makes the reader curious what other artefacts are central to humanitarian action.

Subsequently, the fourth chapter describes how the Sphere Standards became omnipresent in the humanitarian system. Glasman aims to understand how after the genocide in Rwanda, the dreadful situation in the refugee camps close to Goma, and the subsequent Joint

Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda “a small group of people proposed ... a universalist quantification of needs” (p. 125). Glasman convincingly describes the fraught negotiations during the creation of the Sphere Standards, including the conflict between Oxfam and Médecins Sans Frontières on the possibility and utility of such standards. Importantly, he notices that Sphere maintains that minimal standards are universal, but does not say much about the working conditions of the humanitarian organizations. As a result, Sphere focuses on individuals in need, but leaves out the functioning of the humanitarian institutions themselves.

The next two chapters are based on elaborate field research of “how the concepts, classifications, tools, and standards ... in Cameroon in the wake of the Central African crises of 2013/2014” (p. 246). In chapter 5, Glasman asks how Cameroon became an object of humanitarian knowledge and how the identification and quantification of people in need initially became a competitive game among humanitarian agencies. UNHCR preferred to assess their legal status (e.g., as refugee). UNICEF and OCHA focused on (needs-based) vulnerability. Glasman takes the reader to a laterite soccer field in Kenzou, a town in eastern Cameroon, and describes a day in the lives of humanitarian staff who determine refugee status. It is a messy process, and the resulting numbers can be inaccurate. In passing, he notes how the host population has also become a concern for UNHCR.

The sixth chapter describes the role of OCHA in determining vulnerability and, in particular, how the malnourished are being counted. Different types of knowledge beyond legal classification, including medical, economic, logistic, and pedagogical ones, are being used to construct “a composite category of ‘vulnerability’” (p. 211). The description of the actual data collection methods and algorithms that are used to create both a composite nutrition and a general vulnerability indicator is an impressive contribution of this book. Aggregating these composite indicators is not exactly rocket science: “It was the ... explicit decision of OCHA to create a formal equality of the sectors to avoid conflict ‘in order to avoid potentially long and fruitless discussion which could limit the [indicators’] ability to achieve consensus.” As a result, none of the indicators of sectors or organizations was being weighed. Instead, “[t]he production, by way of mathematical averages” provided a fragile consensus among humanitarian actors on vulnerability (p. 234). Only a few experts on the ground acknowledge what gets lost in data collection and aggregation into numbers and reports. Glasman argues that the statistics on vulnerability in joint humanitarian reports that go to donors, humanitarian headquarters, and the national government are overdetermined by the intrinsic logic of the algorithms and leave out much of the political and organizational context. Yet, they regulate and calm the competition among humanitarian organizations.

Given his combination of historical and field research, it is not surprising that in his conclusions Glasman warns against high expectations for big data. He rightly claims that humanitarian quantification is often messy, leaves out much of the context, and does not make explicit the underlying epistemological and methodological choices: “More data does not mean better data” (p. 248). Yet, quantification shapes humanitarian action. Glasman advocates for more attention to the actual functioning of humanitarian institutions and the associated power games. Currently reported numbers focus on the individuals or are aggregated for a whole crisis or a universal comparison of needs, but we do not see the functioning of states, local communities, organizations, and all their struggles. The great merit of this book is that these issues have become visible, but it leaves open how to change this. In other

words, Glasman shows what should be changed – we need to reproblematicize the concept(s) of need – but does not answer the question how this can be changed. Would individual humanitarian workers or organizations be able to alter quantification? If they try to, would donor governments and other humanitarian organizations still take them seriously?

In sum, Glasman uses his historical approach to great effect to show the struggles accompanying quantification. Tools, classifications and standards could have turned out differently and can thus in principle be changed. Reading this book is both demanding, due to its broad scope, and extremely rewarding, as it helps the reader to better understand the humanitarian system and charts new courses for humanitarian research.

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