Introduction

Minimal humanity – the commensuration of human suffering on a global scale

In March 2017, the UN Security Council met at its Manhattan headquarters to listen to the Emergency Coordinator, Steven O'Brien. In the months before, the delegates had come several times to hear him talk about droughts in Central America, earthquakes in Myanmar, a hurricane in Haiti, and the civil war in Syria. This time, O'Brien was reporting about the humanitarian crisis in Africa and the Middle East, and, once again, he tried his best to capture the delegates' attention. He described the ongoing famine in several countries and listed the high figures of persons affected. "More than 20 million people in four countries are facing starvation and famine," he said. "Without aid, people will simply starve to death. Many more will suffer and die from disease."[1] "We stand at a critical point in our history," he said. "We are facing the largest humanitarian crisis since the establishment of the United Nations."[2] O'Brien obviously succeeded in capturing his audience's imagination. News agencies like CNN, Al Jazeera, and the South China Morning Post widely diffused the warning. The "World faces worst humanitarian crisis since 1945," the BBC wrote.[3]

Although many have rightly said that O'Brien's prognosis was a gross overestimation, the aim of this book is not to take part in this controversy – neither is it another lament about the alarmism of humanitarian agencies in the competition for the public's attention.[4] This book is about the invention of "humanitarian needs" and the increased use of quantitative data to compare the effect of catastrophes on different societies. O'Brien's agency regularly publishes figures on "people in need" on the world scale – and so do UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, and many others. The UN system, following its former Secretary-General, calls for a new age of international aid shaped by a "data revolution" and an "evidence based humanitarianism."[5] The aim of this book is to historicize the role of quantification in humanitarian governance.

While O'Brien's vision of the world claims to be universal, non-political, and to transcend state boundaries, this book argues that there is more than this minimalist version of humanity. The way humanitarian agencies compare societies, measure suffering, and aggregate individual pain into universal social categories matters. This rationality not only shapes humanitarian workers' everyday practices and the chances of those whose survival depends on emergency relief[6] – it has also become an intrinsic part of world politics, and it informs our perception of distant societies.

This book deals with the emergence of *humanitarian needology*: The bookkeeping of human suffering on a world scale, i.e. a specific way of capturing others' afflictions through a set of institutions, concepts, classifications, measures, standards, and technologies that allows for global commensurability. My argument here departs from the prevailing – and optimistic – vision of humanitarian quantification. Most observers claim that humanitarian aid has become more efficient, more transparent, and more just due to the professionalization of staff, the accumulation of knowledge, and the use of new technologies. But this narrative overestimates the control that humanitarian agencies have over their tools. I argue here that the tools developed by humanitarian agencies have shaped humanitarian agencies as much as they have been shaped by them, not only in changing the practices of humanitarian aid, but also in displacing its aims, its targets, and its scope. My argument also departs from the now standard criticism that humanitarian quantification is a mere reflection of neoliberal bureaucracy. Although it is true that humanitarian statistics borrow a lot from neoliberal management's tools and epistemology, I argue that they have gained a certain autonomy and their own logic of quantification. Thus, humanitarian agencies are sometimes less the prisoners of other actors than they are of their own history.

Needs assessment entails a tension between the hope of helping others and the fear of chaos, between the will to control and the doubt about our ability to intervene, between empathy and the will to remain at a distance, between the will to humanize and the will to objectify. However, this book is not a nostalgic defense of an earlier regime of humanitarian action that saw human suffering through the lens of compassion, empathy, and an interest for the whole person. Nor is it a condemnation of a new aid regime that cherishes statistics, accumulates Excel sheets, and prefers "cold data" to "warm human relationships." As we will see, quantitative data are anything but cold. Rather, this is a plea for the redeployment of historical knowledge in the age of big data.[7] What do aid agencies mean when they say that there are 125.3 million "people in need" on the planet?[8] What does the Emergency Coordinator mean when he says that "*We* are facing a humanitarian crisis"? How is this "we" composed, collected, and represented? How does this collective hold together – and how might someone legitimately act in its name?

The historicity of humanitarian needs

Humanitarian workers have not always attempted to address "human needs" – at least not as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) understands the concept today, both as a universal category of *statistical comparison* and as a definition of a *minimally acceptable standard of living*. Consider, for instance, an excerpt from *Un Souvenir de Solferino*, one of the canonic texts of humanitarianism. Its author, Henri Dunant, founded the Red Cross and is considered to be one of the fathers of modern humanitarian aid. Describing the suffering of soldiers wounded in the battle of Solferino (1862), Dunant wrote:

> The wounded unfortunates who are hoisted up all day long are pale, livid, breathless; some, and more particularly those who have been profoundly

mutilated, have a dazed look and seem not to understand what is being said to them, they fix haggard eyes on you, but this apparent prostration doesn't prevent one from feeling their suffering; the others are restless and agitated by a nervous breakdown and a convulsive trembling; these, with open wounds where inflammation has already begun to develop, are nearly mad from pain, they ask that they be killed, they contort, with contracted visage, in the last grips of agony.[9]

For Dunant, human suffering was worthy of compassion, regardless of any cultural or national affiliation. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not take sides in favor of French, Austrian, or Sardinian soldiers – which is why he received the 1901 Nobel Peace Prize. However, Dunant barely spoke of "needs." His text illustrates the individuality of pain and the most graphic forms of physical suffering, including soldiers' "open wounds," their "pale" wounded complexions, and their "haggard eyes." His gaze was driven by emotion rather than calculation, by compassion for the suffering individual rather than by a quest for generalization through scientific comparison.[10]

Let us now consider a contemporary, twenty-first-century description of distant suffering.[11] In the following excerpt, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) describes the situation of refugees from the Central African Republic who were living in Cameroon:

> Refugees from [the] Central African Republic in the east of Cameroon are facing a steady deterioration of their living conditions. They are at risk of malnutrition with a 17.2 percent prevalence of acute malnutrition among refugee children and mortality rates are six to seven times higher than the emergency threshold in some areas. Additional interventions are essential to address nutritional problems especially amongst children, pregnant and lactating women. School enrolment rates are low, with less than a third of girls enrolled. Programmes to construct additional school facilities, sensitize parents to the benefits of education and provide school supplies, could help bridge this gap. Additional gaps include lack of access to primary health care, lack of countrywide availability of anti-retro viral treatments for HIV/AIDS, inadequate supplies of sanitary materials and non-food items, and insufficient quantities of drinking water. Living conditions for many urban refugees are deplorable and urgent attention to shelter is needed.[12]

Unlike Dunant's text, this excerpt does not claim to have been written by a single person. It is the product of an undefined number of anonymous humanitarian experts. Though the way in which it designates the target of humanitarian aid is different, its overall objective is the same as that of *Un Souvenir de Solferino*: Encouraging the reader to support humanitarian action. UNHCR is one of the largest agencies for humanitarian assistance; it has a mandate to protect and assist refugees. It has gained a high level of public recognition and received the Nobel Peace Prize twice.[13] As can be seen in the excerpt, UNHCR lists *objectified* problems according to domains of intervention (malnutrition, mortality, nutrition,

education, health, drinking water, shelter, etc.). It mobilizes *categories of beneficiaries* (young children, pregnant and nursing women, urban refugees), uses *standard definitions* ("acute malnutrition," "mortality," "non-food items"), and *quantified indicators* (prevalence of malnutrition, mortality rates). Unlike *Un Souvenir de Solferino*, UNHCR's text is not presented as the result of subjective experience. Of course, subjective descriptions of suffering still play an important role in the humanitarian gaze. It has almost become an academic routine to criticize contemporary politics for its constant mobilization of moral sentiments and to analyze the frequent use of metaphors, pictures, and narratives triggering compassion, empathy, or pity.[14] But the compassionate view of distant suffering is increasingly supported by another type of information with an objectivist ambition. Dunant described what he had seen and felt on a particular battlefield. In contrast, UNHCR is working simultaneously in 130 countries, addressing the suffering of refugees across borders and within the most diverse social and cultural settings. In order to justify the "impartiality" of its actions, it relies on standard definitions, quantification, and systematic assessment procedures.

Aid workers are well aware that they are exercising power when they construct refugee camps, select the target groups for aid projects, deliver goods and services, organize consultations, etc. Indeed, humanitarian agencies act like governments at a distance. However, they know that they have to justify their actions, as their legitimacy cannot be proven through elections or referenda. Aid agencies must therefore make considerable efforts to legitimize their presence and their decisions in the allocation of resources. "We cannot prevent disasters," agencies explain, "but we can try to deliver relief aid in an impartial way." Aid agencies argue that a better assessment of people's needs is a precondition for aid that is more just and, eventually, for a world that is fairer. However, as I will argue in the following pages, this argument hides a deep contradiction: The more aid agencies have acted on larger scales, the more they have reduced and simplified their definition of needs.

Humanitarian "impartiality" as a view from nowhere

The argument presented here is not that humanitarian quantification is new – the argument is that quantification currently plays a key role in the legitimation of humanitarian aid, to the point that numbers are believed to be the most efficient guardians of humanitarian impartiality.

Humanitarian statistics are not new. While Henri Dunant was giving a qualitative account of the battle near Solferino, Jean Charles Chenu, a physician in the French army, was painstakingly counting the dead and injured soldiers of Solferino, producing a detailed, statistical account of the war.[15] As will be seen in Chapter 1, state administrations and universities produced many statistics on demography, health, poverty, hunger, war casualties, asylum seekers, and natural disasters throughout the nineteenth century – a practice that was systematized during the first half of the twentieth century. The two world wars were times of intense production for statistics – on body density, logistics, stocks, displaced persons, resources, etc.[16]

However, during the twentieth century, decisive shifts took place in the role played by humanitarian numbers – their *producers*, their *scale*, and their *use* for justifying action. International organizations and non-governmental organizations are playing an increasing role in the *production* of data. These organizations not only aggregate data provided by states, they also provide their own expertise, guidelines, staff, and norms to help states produce them. In many cases, international organizations and NGOs produce data independently. The *scale* of their statistical ambition has changed. Until the 1940s, international statistics on poverty, hunger, or migration did not include the world's colonized population (roughly a third of the global population). Statistics on colonized subjects were carefully singled out: It did not occur to Dunant's contemporaries to compare the basic needs of European citizens with those of African subjects. Now, UN datasets aim at producing *universal* comparisons. Finally, humanitarian statistics now enjoy an aura of legitimacy of which Dunant and Chenu's generation could never have dreamed. The current hype for quantitative humanitarianism, for big data fueled by digital technologies, should call for an urgent reexamination of its past.[17]

A good indicator of the changing role of quantification in humanitarian aid is the shift in the definition of "humanitarian impartiality." All major actors now agree that humanitarian aid should be "impartial," and that "aid priorities [shall be] calculated on the basis of need alone."[18] While most literature on humanitarian principles traces the origin of "impartiality" back to Henri Dunant and the foundation of the Red Cross, virtually none mentions the radical shift in the definition during the second half of the twentieth century. For Dunant, impartiality and neutrality meant that humanitarian actors should not take sides – in his case, by favoring either the French, Austrian, or Sardinian soldiers – but provide relief to them all. He argued that the humanitarian's point of view was *external* to that of the conflicting parties. However, this had nothing to do with quantification. In the prevailing nineteenth-century European discourse on charity, this position of externality was justified by reference to the monotheistic, far-removed God, who was independent of mortal passions. The early twentieth-century Red Cross movement justified its humanitarian impartiality by analogy to the position of a judge or physician: Both were thought to be impartial because of their training and professional ethics.

It was only after the Second World War that a juridical and medical ethic of impartiality began to be increasingly backed and supported, if not gradually replaced, by the concept of statistical objectivity. Impartiality, in today's interpretation of humanitarian principles, is the necessity of helping people "according to their needs," a definition that is increasingly being interpreted as kind of mathematical rules of distribution. Thus, needs have not only become the metric, but also the moral compass of humanitarian aid: Impartiality is no longer defined as God's point of view, or that of a judge or medical doctor, but as the point of view of the algorithm.[19]

Much is now expected from humanitarian quantification: It is supposed to ensure the impartiality of relief and legitimize humanitarian action vis-à-vis other modes of action (political, economic, etc.), as well as ensuring the cohesion of the

humanitarian field.[20] This is a highly competitive field: Dozens of UN agencies, hundreds of international NGOs, and thousands of local NGOs compete for humanitarian funding and public attention. Aid agencies have different target populations (refugees, victims of natural catastrophes, people injured in wars, children, etc.), different traditions, and different objectives. Needs assessment has, however, become the new *doxa* of humanitarian aid: The quantification, hierarchization, and prioritization of needs is increasingly considered able to ensure cooperation and consensus within the "humanitarian community" – this might be too large a task for these fragile numbers.

To borrow from the approach of science historian Lorraine Daston, humanitarian agencies speak from an "aperspectival" point of view: They do not speak from a specific place, they take a point of view from everywhere and therefore "from nowhere."[21] They build on an ontology of humanity. The notion of needs aligns a moral impetus with juridical categories, statistical tools, technical devices, manufactured items, and expert practices. It allows international aid organizations to compare different individual destinies, while at the same time articulating them according to the horizon of a common humanity.

Universal vital minimum as the lowest common denominator of humanity

Another argument of this book is that humanitarian quantification not only ensures worldwide comparison, but also sets specific norms. A common assumption is that humanitarian needs assessment puts quantification first and decision-making second (ideally, decisions are taken on the basis of quantification). As will be seen here, the quantification of needs actually requires crucial decisions to be made *before* the needs assessment has been begun. For instance, as Chapter 3 will show, one cannot assess acute malnutrition in different communities without having first established a common yardstick to enable the comparison. This book, therefore, does not separate the history of statistics from the history of the yardstick, i.e. the standards and thresholds that humanitarian agencies have used to define what they variously describe as "survival," "elementary," "emergency," "fundamental," "primary," "urgent," "essential," "acute," or "basic" needs. Therefore, this book is also about the thin line that separates, in the view of those experts, the bare minimum from the rest.

Aid agencies argue that their perimeter of action is global, *because* of the universality of needs. Of course, the idea of a common humanity that transcends national or cultural boundaries is old.[22] Similarly, the attempt to establish a commensurability of bodies through quantification dates back at least two centuries.[23] Humanitarian agencies have however recently merged these two endeavors: The idea of humanity as a single and common community (expressed, for instance, in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights), and the commensurability of all human suffering (expressed through indicators and standard definitions) have become two sides of the same coin. The category of "people in need" is the result of this fusion.

The history of humanitarian aid is a paradigmatic example of a more general "rise in globality."[24] Humanitarian actors are not alone in seeing the whole planet as a pertinent scale of intervention. The twentieth century has witnessed the birth of a "global population," a "global economy," and a "global environment," as well as a "juridical humanity."[25] The globe as a whole is now seen as the natural horizon of humanitarianism.[26] Humanitarian aid is not only an ambition to help a *large number* of people but, potentially, to help *every single person in need* on the planet. The UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies*, for instance, speaks of "worldwide" action, while the Sphere *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* creates nothing less than "universal minimum standards" that apply anywhere in the world.[27]

But this rise in globality has been marked by a contradiction: The more universal the comparison of needs has become, the narrower it has become. Thus the definition propagated by the UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies* declares that in situations of distress: "Everyone in the population, irrespective of age or sex, should receive exactly the same general ration (i.e. same quantity and type of foods)."[28] According to UNHCR, for a standard population, humanitarian organizations should provide at least: *2,100 kcal of food* (including 350 to 400 grams of staple cereal, 20 to 40 grams of an energy-rich food like oil or fat, and 50 grams of a protein-rich food), *15 to 20 liters of clean water* (to drink, cook, and wash) per person and per day and *3.5 square meters of sheltered space* (tents, or other structures), *one latrine seat per 20 people, one wheelbarrow per 500 people, one 100-liter refuse bin per 50 people*, etc.[29] This definition of needs is in accordance with that of other large humanitarian agencies[30] such as the definition given by the Sphere Project (see Chapter 4). However, it is more than an ethereal list of standards listed and printed in obscure handbooks. The indicators and thresholds that it suggests also have a material dimension: The list determines the entire dispositive material of aid intervention, and the tools and instruments provided by humanitarian agencies, including tents, cooking utensils, and medical devices that are industrially produced according to these standards, thus shaping the practices of aid workers and the lives of recipients. The notion of "basic needs" (along with how embedded it is in materiality and technology) is the keystone of what scholars increasingly call the "humanitarian government" of the world i.e., to borrow Michel Agier's definition, the "globalized apparatus" made of "a set of organizations, networks, agents, and financial means distributed across different countries and crisscrossing the world as they herald a universal cause, the only and exclusive raison d'être of humanitarian projects."[31]

Herein lies the paradox: The more the definition of "needs" has been claimed to be applicable to all, the more it has been simplified, in an eternal search for the lowest common denominator of humanity. The more humanitarian action became global, the more its notion of needs shrank. According to the viewpoint expressed by UNHCR and other agencies, the tastes, politics, and interests of different societies depend on where they live. Their basic needs, however, do not. "What do we really require to survive?" humanitarians ask. What is the minimum, the bottom line below which less is nothing and more is optional? What is negotiable, and what is not?

The following chapters explore how humanitarian experts have come to answer these questions over the last decades. Our current definition of needs is, this book argues, the result of power struggles between aid agencies (and, in a second instance, the result of power struggles between those agencies and other actors of aid, including donors, states, aid recipients, etc.). While agencies solve their problems, either through the victory of one position over the other, or through ad hoc compromises, their decisions lead to the creation of new social categories, the adoption of new concepts, the codification of norms, the production of industrialized items, or the adoption of standard procedures. Thus, the whole apparatus of aid transports black-boxed assumptions that historical research may unpack.[32] Practice theories (especially actor–network theory and pragmatic sociology) constitute an important conceptual resource here. The important points are that actors contribute to defining the scale of their actions, and that their actions are not solely symbolic – it is not only about how the actors represent the world, but how they *perform* it:[33] The notion of needs is not only a representation of a real world that would exist outside of it, but a tool that has physical repercussions on the individual recipients' life chances. Specific attention to categories and material artifacts therefore enables us to rediscover possibilities that despite once having been dismissed, may help to reopen new horizons.

Writing about humanitarian aid: The good, the bad, and the historical[34]

The literature on humanitarian aid is polarized. Some authors never tire of celebrating humanitarianism's moral virtuousness, while others have had an easy job of enumerating the bloopers of failed relief projects.[35] Aid glorification and aid bashing may be entertaining (both definitely have their readers), but they are not always helpful for understanding the past and thinking about the future. The academic literature sometimes succeeds in going beyond this polarization but, as far as historical knowledge is concerned, this is apparently still not an easy task.[36]

Many authors share Ban Ki-Moon's optimism about "evidence based humanitarianism." In their view, statistics have increased the visibility, efficiency, and transparency of international aid. Management, information technology, and big data analysis tools are believed to contribute to better accountability of relief. When considering the past, these authors consider that the growth in humanitarian expertise was a reaction to a steadily growing humanitarian problem (a growing number of catastrophes and wars). In this light, universal standards appear as a sign of the "professionalization" of humanitarian aid. The codification of humanitarian aid is thus seen as evidence that emergency relief is becoming more efficient and more just.

Even these optimist authors often emphasize the difficulties of professionalization in the sector. These difficulties are mostly seen as persisting *in spite of* the growing bureaucratization, standardization, and specialization of humanitarian agencies. The construction of humanitarian knowledge is generally understood to be in congruence with a long history of humanitarian progress, having roots

in eighteenth-century humanism, the Enlightenment, and the nineteenth-century abolition of the slave trade. Christian and humanistic moral values such as empathy, altruism, philanthropy, and charity are described as the motors of humanitarianism. For Michael Barnett, for instance, humanitarian aid is the result of a "revolution in moral sentiments"[37] and for Michael Ignatieff, there was a "revolution of moral concern"[38] during the second half of the twentieth century. Seen in this perspective, the professionalization of aid is a consequence of a moral transformation – a quasi-metaphysical perspective that David Rieff has therefore labeled "neo-Hegelian."[39]

This perspective, however, has a strong teleological bias: It regards the geographical expansion of international aid as an unproblematic and quasi-natural necessity.[40] It assumes that humanitarian globalization has simply followed a steady increase in the need for aid. In recent decades, the number of forcibly displaced persons has increased rapidly, amounting to 51.2 million in 2014.[41] Accordingly, the totality of humanitarian operations' budgets has multiplied by 10 in the last 20 years.[42] In this line of thought, the rise in global humanitarian aid has been propelled by the growing number of disaster victims.[43]

This literature, however, fails to understand how aid agencies have defined the problem that they wanted to tackle. The conventional narrative considers the problems addressed by relief aid (diseases, hunger, etc.) as universal *per se*. According to this view, international NGOs and UN agencies simply waited for their material and technological capacity to grow in order to expand across the globe. Globalization is presented as a powerful force that was impossible for humanitarian actors to resist. The conventional historiography of humanitarianism considers globalization to be a mysterious driving force beyond the scope of its study. This explanation results in a strange tautology: Globalization is presented as a cause of humanitarian globalization.[44]

A growing number of critical studies have recently been published that disagree with this conventional narrative.[45] These studies consider humanitarian aid to be a set of discourses and practices which are part of the globalization processes. They consider that aid is a part of global governmentality, in Michel Foucault's sense of the term, deploying a kind of biopolitical domination that targets territories, bodies, and populations, and thereby shapes people's needs. From this perspective, needs are neither natural nor ahistorical.

Critical anthropologists show that, notwithstanding the allure of its simplicity and straightforwardness, humanitarianism does in fact shape its object of intervention. Beyond the apparent "moral clarity" of humanitarianism's approach to "real problems" and the "life and death" matters it addresses,[46] there is actually a complex power/knowledge relationship at play.[47] This critical perspective has also led to a reexamination of the use of statistics in development aid. Morton Jerven's work on the problems of GDP as an indicator of growth has (re)launched a debate about "statistical fictions" in Africa.[48] Several authors have criticized the idea of a "data revolution," while denouncing a "statistical myth," a "mirage of technology," and "data hubris."[49] Studies have indicated the negative effects of quantification. Some fear a decline of face-to-face interactions in favor of remote

control, a phenomenon that has been labelled "cyber humanitarianism"[50] or "digital humanitarianism."[51] The quantification of aid also pressures aid agencies into a harsh competition to produce quantifiable results. Statistics thus may contribute to depoliticize crisis situations, this literature argues.

However, this critical (and often neo-Foucauldian) perspective relies heavily on anthropology and political sciences, and less often on history. Thus, some critics bear witness to a static analysis that reduces humanitarian power to an oversimplified essence, be it "neocolonial," "neoliberal," or "biopolitical" in nature.[52] The notion that frequent "humanitarian" intervention in the global South participates in a "humanitarian government" is useful. However, we should avoid overestimating the coherence and strength of the humanitarian system. In the same way, we should avoid reducing science and techniques to a mere rationale of power.

While the neo-Hegelian perspective is overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the technicization of aid, some neo-Foucauldian perspectives consider technicity simply as evidence of domination. For example, the author Jean-Pierre Godding implies that while humanitarian aid is becoming increasingly focused on cold statistics, it is forgetting about human beings:

> The UNHCR considers [. . .] refugees more as statistical units, numbers in an administration, perhaps as animals in a zoo. Most important are the centiliters of water, the grams of corn or of firewood necessary for their survival.[53]

However, this perspective tends to overestimate the solidity of the power structure under scrutiny, and it lacks awareness of historical contingencies. If we portray the globalization of humanitarianism as nothing but an avatar of the wider process of globalization – ultimately rooted in economic relations or biopolitics – we lose sight of humanitarian aid's specific, active contribution to the process.[54] While conventional accounts consider globalization to be a general cause of social change that lies beyond the scope of its study, critical anthropology portrays humanitarian aid as a mere symptom of a more powerful, hidden global structure. In both cases, the task of addressing globalization is left to others. The work done by humanitarian workers and experts to *globalize* aid is not considered an object of analysis in its own right.

This is the area to which the historical analysis presented here aims to contribute. For optimists, technical knowledge makes humanitarianism more efficient, and thus more valuable. In contrast, for their critics, technicity is dehumanizing humanitarian aid and making it worthless. But in both cases, the sphere of objects and the sphere of ideas are clearly distinguishable: Humanitarian action is shaped by morality and materiality, but the two hardly seem to interact. The approach taken here is different. This book looks at how the epistemic community of humanitarian experts articulate morality and materiality as being mutually entwined.[55] This approach is inspired by the global history of humanitarian aid,[56] as well as the historical sociology of social problems.[57] Before going further, let us consider why the Central African region has become one of the privileged sites for humanitarian knowledge.

Central Africa and the last frontier of humanity

It is only recently that Africa has come to be seen as the continent of poverty, hunger, and war. In the late 1940s, in the aftermath of the war, Central Europe was more frequently associated with humanitarian crises than Central Africa: Mass displacement, malnutrition, and epidemics were European realities.[58] However, the humanitarian focus shifted during the 1980s and 1990s: The Central African region is now seen as the ultimate frontier of humanitarian universalism.[59] The red zones on the UN agencies' maps of absolute poverty, the Human Development Index, the Gender Related Development Index, the Gender Empowerment Measure, and many others, are frequently to be found south of the Sahara.

Why does Africa play such an important role in the world's humanitarian government? A common argument is that Africa has been more prone to humanitarian crises than other parts of the world and has therefore attracted more humanitarian interventions. Wars have occurred in Africa more often than elsewhere.[60] Therefore, the continent has accounted for a large part of the world's refugee population;[61] in 2014, it still accounted for one-fourth of the world's forcibly displaced persons.[62] Similar arguments have been made about famine, poverty, and natural disasters. Some authors also establish a link between aid relief and the decline of the postcolonial state (sometimes described as an "underdeveloped," "weak," or "failed" state). A variant of this argument is that international and non-governmental organizations have contributed to the weakening of the postcolonial state since the 1980s.[63]

Another possible explanation for Africa's place in the humanitarian agencies' globalist imagination is linked to the historicity of the postcolonial state. Modern states are often described in sociological theory as institutions of knowledge. The production and storage of knowledge about populations (archives, files, cadasters, registers, censuses, identity documents, maps, statistics, etc.) is a key feature of modern European states. In Foucault's terminology, the state is intent upon generating "governmentality," power over its population's well-being.[64] However, recent works have shown that in Africa, modern statehood often arised without a monopolization of knowledge about the population – some states may function, at least in part, without relying on governmentality – Keith Breckenridge speaks of "power without knowledge."[65] Colonial states in Africa were often unable to provide even the most basic data on the colonized population. The French colonial administration produced little data on poverty, hunger, diseases, or colonial subject migration.[66] In some cases, colonial states did not even want to enumerate or identify large proportions of the population.[67] This was not only because the states lacked the resources but also because, in many cases, they simply had "no will to know."[68] This is one of the most striking results of current sociological research on the state; the cost and energy associated with governmentality were, at least in the view of many colonial governors and their postcolonial successors, not worth it. The sources of power did not lie within the population but at the doors of the state, in the monopoly of external resources – at the "gates" of the state, to use Frederick Cooper's description.[69]

According to this line of thought, heads of states have willingly refrained from investing in governmental bureaucracies. Instead, they have deliberately "discharged" or delegated[70] these tasks to others, including international organizations or NGOs. As Greg Mann showed, postcolonial leaders did not wait until the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s to delegate bureaucratic tasks to NGOs – they started soon after their countries' independence, in the 1960s, when the postcolonial state was perceived to be a strong and ambitious institution.[71] Thus, there is a continuity between the colonial lack of interest in rural populations and the relative scarcity of official statistical data on demography, health, or economics.[72] The politics of austerity during the era of the World Bank's structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s actually worsened the already-weak efficiency of state bureaucracies.

Thus, the international government of Africa is rooted in the long history of the state on the continent.[73] As soon as the African states became independent, international organizations and foreign institutions furnished funds, tools, and expertise for the production of statistical data. The World Bank and the UN contributed to GDP calculations, household consumption surveys, and censuses. International institutions' interest in knowledge on African societies increased during the food and refugee crises of the 1970s and the 1980s, and rose further in the 1990s and 2000s, when some regions, identified by donor countries as "ungoverned places," were seen as potential threats to Western states.[74] Africa became one of the aid agencies' favorite places for intervention; it went on to receive the largest amount of aid, in terms of the financial share of global humanitarian contributions.[75] Thus, Central Africa has long been imagined as one of the last frontiers of humanitarian universalism.

Sources and structure of the book

I started research on this topic in 2014, shortly after the United Nations and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee classified the crisis in Central Africa as a Level 3 Emergency situation (the most severe type of emergency in this classification). The civil war in the Central African Republic had produced approximately 1 million displaced persons and refugees, thus having a major impact on all neighboring countries.[76] The largest group of refugees fled to Cameroon,[77] where I observed the work of aid agencies in the Cameroonian borderland in November and December 2014. I started by identifying some salient elements of what can be called a humanitarian *infrastructure of commensurability* (concepts, classifications, artifacts, and standards) and used those elements as entry points into history. Returning to Cameroon in 2015 and 2016, I looked more closely at the use of technology in needs assessments led by UN agencies.[78] As well as interviews with aid workers, I analyzed articles and reports (grey literature) written by humanitarian experts. I used material from the Geneva-based archives of UNHCR, the Sphere Project, and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, MSF). Some of the most interesting aspects of the debate were found reading the handwritten notes from meeting protocols and email correspondence among aid experts.

The first chapter in this book analyzes concepts of "needs" in history. Contrary to common assumptions, the use of "needs" in humanitarian assistance is relatively new. Looking at the genealogy of the notion, the chapter argues that its success at the end of the twentieth century lay in its malleability. "Needs" have been shaped by different and sometimes competing fields of knowledge such as political economy, health care, and international law. While organizations may draw on one (or several) different definition of needs, the ambiguities of the notion allow for consent that is sometimes based on working misunderstandings.

The second chapter moves from concept to classification. Crucial material issues (the quantity of food one receives, the size and quality of the tent one lives in, or the walking distance to the water tap one may use) depend upon the category of people-in-need one belongs to. This chapter investigates the origins of categories used by UNHCR to classify refugees. There are juridical categories (*refugee*, *internally displaced person*, *returnee*, etc.) as well as other social categories (*vulnerable groups*, *disabled*, *separated minors*, etc.). Looking at 50 years of refugee classification in Central Africa, the chapter argues that the notion of "needs" has shifted from a narrow legal category to a composite notion, including medical vulnerability.

The third chapter adds a materialist dimension to the argument of the book. It explores a tool for the determination of acute malnutrition – MUAC (mid-upper arm circumference) tape. MUAC tape has become a signature tool in humanitarian aid: It is used to screen children, to map emergencies, and to prioritize interventions. This tool allows for exploration of the questions of triage, the medicalization of the definition of needs, the role of statistics in humanitarian controversies, and the iconic role of hunger in the moral economy of aid. Thus, this measuring tool is emblematic of a range of industrialized items used by the humanitarian apparatus (tents, food rations, kitchen sets, etc.) that entail a solidified definition of human needs and shape everyday humanitarian practices.

Figure 0.1 Lolo refugee camps in East Cameroon, 2014.

Source: ©Glasman

Figure 0.2 Sphere Archive in Geneva.

Source: ©Glasman

The fourth chapter investigates the standardization of good humanitarian practice by large aid agencies since the 1980s. While some refined their own "humanitarian principles," others produced handbooks in which they listed the *dos* and *don'ts* of their profession. UNHCR, UNICEF, Oxfam, CARE, and MSF produced such handbooks, but none have been more controversial and more influential than the aforementioned Sphere Handbook. The Sphere Project attempted to produce a handbook of all handbooks, a definition of survival needs oriented toward an ISO-norms-like understanding of aid work.

While the first four chapters consider the concepts, categories, artifacts, and standards in a successive way, the last pair of chapters returns to Cameroon to explore how aid workers put the different pieces of the puzzle together. These

Figure 0.3 UNHCR headquarters in Geneva.

Source: Courtesy of UNHCR

chapters start with the production of a key figure produced by humanitarian agencies, the estimation of a number of "people in need." Chapter 5 looks at the emergence of a knowledge of crisis in Cameroon, and the registration of refugees by UNHCR. Chapter 6 looks at the construction of the number of malnourished children by UNICEF, and at the mapping of "vulnerability" in Cameroon. Both chapters analyze needs assessment as a tool to pacify the competition between humanitarian agencies. Technology, it is argued, does not play the role that one expects: Even when digital technologies are included in the process, needs assessment still relies heavily on low tech. Moreover, high tech does not necessarely means higher transparency.

The conclusion discusses the notion of *minimal humanity*, and engages with some possible paths to rethink needs assessment. I argue that our current *infrastructure of commensurability* is minimalist – both in the sense that it is *narrow* in what it compares, and that it sets a *low bar* for satisfaction.[79] Thus, a global bookkeeping of human needs has only limited ability to inform a critique of power. Technological solutionism will not solve the contempt for local institutions. A defense of a true universalism that goes beyond a flat globalism implies a redeployment of our infrastructure of commensurability.
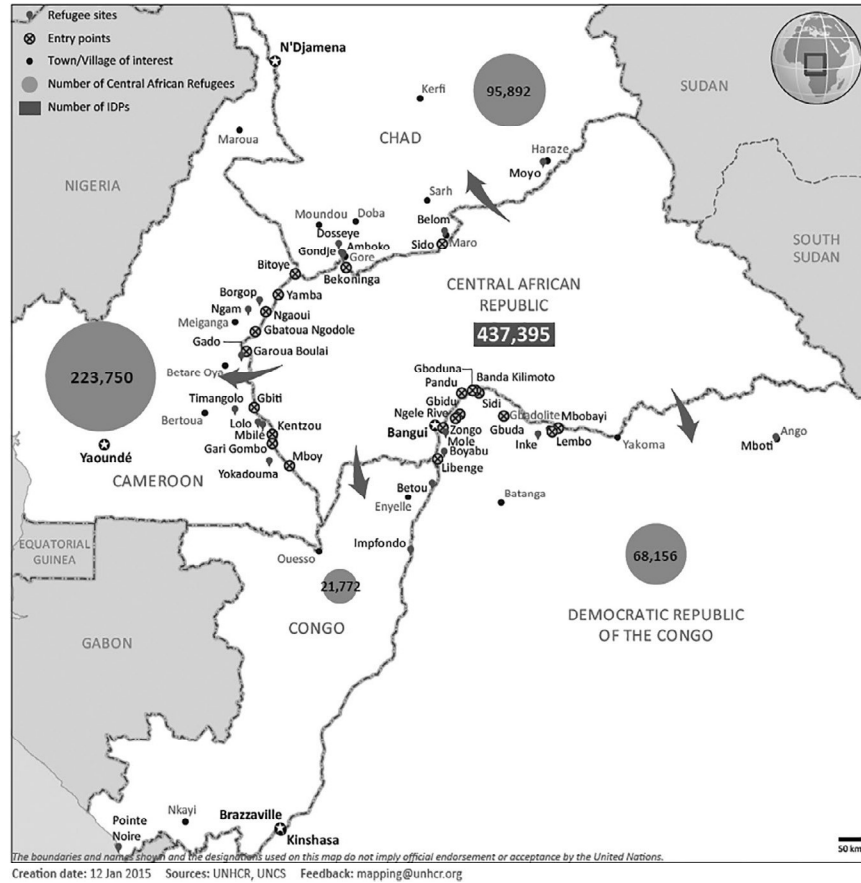
Figure 0.4 Map of Central African L3 Emergency, 2014.

Source: UNHCR, Central African Republic Regional Refugee Response Plan, Jan–Dec. 2015, p. 6.

Notes

1 United Nations Security Council. Meetings conducted by the Security Council, 7897th Meeting, New York, 10 March 2017, 3 p.m. www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc. asp?symbol=S/PV.7897 (Accessed 2018-01-31).
2 Ibid.
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China Morning Post. UN says world faces largest humanitarian crisis since 1945. 2017-03-11; 20 million people could starve. South China Morning. Post, 2017-03-11. https://www.scmp.com/news/world/africa/article/2078072/un-says-world-faces-largest-humanitarian-crisis-1945-20-million (Accessed 2018-02-13).

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    See Chapter 1 for the history of the notion of impartiality.

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27 The Sphere Project. *Humanitarian charter and minimum standards in disaster response*, Geneva: The Sphere Project, 2004: 2.

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79 To my knowledge, Liisa Malkki was the first to use the notion of "minimal humanity," which she uses (as a synonym for "bare" or "naked" humanity) to designate a mode of representation of refugees that does not strictly dehumanize, but "humanize in a particular mode." Malkki, Liisa, Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization, in: *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol 11, 3, 1996, 377-404. Here p. 390. For a discussion on "minimal biopolitics," see Redfield, 2013: 18–22.

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1 Concepts
Elements of a genealogy of *needology*

"Impartiality" is now recognized as a paramount principle of humanitarian aid –
not only by NGOs, but also by UN agencies and governments.[1] The academic
literature, as well as the official documentation of these organizations, traces the
notion of impartiality back to its original formulation in humanitarian law in
the 1864 Geneva Convention and to the work of Henri Dunant.[2] However, this
official version misses an important shift in the definition of "impartiality." For
Dunant and the Convention, impartiality was not a rule of distribution – it was
a clause of non-discrimination. It was much later that "impartiality" came to be
understood as rule of mathematic distribution of good and services. It was Jean
Pictet, in the 1940s, who inscribed the idea of "proportionality" in the definition
of "impartiality": Aid relief would have to be distributed "according to needs."
During the last decades of the twentieth century, the definition of impartiality
became increasingly associated with the *quantification* of needs. As the *Code of Con-
duct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs* endorsed by
the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response states: "Aid priorities are
calculated on the basis of need alone."[3] Any good humanitarian project, it is
now argued, should start with a quantitative estimation of suffering – the famous
"needs assessment."[4]

How did *needology* – the global bookkeeping of suffering – become the *doxa* of the
humanitarian field? This chapter starts with an analysis of "impartiality" within
international humanitarian law and focuses on the contribution of Jean Pictet. As
a Geneva-based ICRC jurist, Pictet drew on the heritage of international humani-
tarian law and human rights law, reinterpreting two others Genevans – Henri
Dunant and Jean Jacques Rousseau. But the inflection that Jean Pictet gave to
the definition of impartiality, and the subsequent formulation of the "according
to needs" principle, was preceded by a general shift in the perception of suffering
that occurred between the 1870s and the Second World War. During the three-
quarters of a century that separated Dunant from Pictet, the perception of needs
within industrialized societies changed almost totally. It was a decisive period for
the conceptualization of needs – on one side, people increasingly talked about
"needs"; on the other side, within a few decades, the quantification of suffering
became one of the favorite activities of state bureaucracies and scientists. While
Pictet worked on humanitarian principles, everyone was talking about needs and

their quantification – when Dunant was working on the Geneva Convention, almost no one did.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, two fields of knowledge increasingly addressed the question of sufficiency: One was *political economy*. In this period, the European bourgeoisie was preoccupied with questions such as political order and social cohesion. How could states avoid social protests and maintain order? What was the minimum provision that people should receive to live and work? Those questions fueled an interest in poverty and working-class consumption. Another field of knowledge, *health care*, the definition of biological needs and the quantification of bodily consumption (for instance the quantification of food rations), witnessed increasing attention at the end of the nineteenth century.

Both traditions of thoughts – *political economy* and *health* – diffused a new understanding of needs as individual and quantifiable category. During the two world wars, the quantification of the needs of soldiers and civil populations became a military and strategic matter. Notions like "triage" (i.e. the classification of patients in order of priority) spread throughout military medicine and emergency relief. Questions of minimal provision and sufficiency became a matter of national interest in a global competition among capitalism, fascism, and Bolshevism. Thus, in the 1940s, everyone was talking about needs. One highly influential theory, Abraham Maslow's famous "hierarchy of needs," was formulated at the same moment as Pictet's legal codification. By the end of the Second World War, the idea that needs were quantifiable, hiearchizable, and prioritizable had become common sense. The very notion of "needs" had migrated from the field of expert knowledge to everyday language (in the same manner as other words such as "class," "GDP," "crisis," "depression," or "stress," etc.).[5]

While everyone was now measuring needs, it was not about the needs of everyone. Needs could be compared and quantified, but they were not *universal*. The last sections of this chapter address the question of colonial differentialism and the late universalization of needs. In the colonial territories, the quantification of needs only targeted a handful of categories of persons: Soldiers, workers, settlers, etc. After the Second World War, African intellectuals, politicians, and labor unionists increasingly fought against the colonial division of needs in two distinct classes – one for Europeans, one for "native" populations. Moreover it was only in the 1970s, long after the decolonial wave of the 1960s, that international organizations made "basic needs" a key tool for the global commensuration of social distress.

Needs as a legal category: Impartiality, proportionality, entitlement

The principle of "impartiality" is mostly attributed to Henri Dunant and the authors of the 1864 Geneva Convention.[6] But there is often confusion in this narrative between the idea of impartiality as it was used in the nineteenth century and the idea as it is used today. The 1864 Geneva Convention did include a clause that one could describe as an "impartiality clause," but it did not mention