



**Joël Glasman.** *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs: Minimal Humanity.* Routledge Humanitarian Studies Series. London: Routledge, 2020. Illustrations. 275 pp. \$160.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-367-22215-4.

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There is a well-worn narrative used to frame emergency relief in the twenty-first century. First, an announcement is made that a large population (usually a specified number, in a named country or region) is facing “urgent” or “potentially catastrophic” crisis. This, in turn, is accompanied by a plea for resources, often made “in the name of humanity,” to meet their immediate needs. Behind the scenes, aid agencies put in train programs to respond to the emergency. They undertake “needs assessments” and move resources—human, medical, technological, and nutritional—to the field. They also clarify the target of their interventions: refugees, local communities, or internally displaced people, frequently categorized by gender or age. And they end with a promise. Once in place, they state, their aid will be used “efficiently” and “effectively” to make sure that it reaches those most in need.

Much of this, I am sure, will be familiar to readers. Yet few of us have probably ever stopped to ask, why is aid organized this way? Joël Glasman’s excellent new book, *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs*, goes a long way to answering this question. It begins by historicizing how human needs have been measured, by whom, and where. As Glasman argues, this process involves nothing less than the globalization of

aid. Changes to the definition of “impartiality,” driven by Red Cross legal theorist Jean Pictet, shifted the rationale for intervention to stress minimum measures of human subsistence. Renewed interest in welfare as a tool of social control in the post-Second World War period extended its “war on want” principle to the foreign aid regime. Likewise, the reorientation of health and poverty indicators—from tools like the calorie to psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs—changed the measurement of individual needs. The rise of international development, and the collection of poverty-related data it precipitated, had a similar impact on knowledge of deprivation. The cumulative effect of these changes was to make needs a primary currency of conversation in the humanitarian sector. It also served to divorce their delivery from their immediate context. Once rendered quantifiable, intervention to save biological life could be made imperative, regardless of geography.

From that chronological foundation, Glasman analyzes the categorization of aid, the search for standards to govern it, and the practices that sustain it. As he puts it, how “humanitarian agencies compare societies, measure suffering, and aggregate individual pain into universal social categories matters” (p. 1). Not only has the quantification of

needs had a significant impact on the definition and delivery of aid, but it also has generated a particular vision of the suffering of others. This book uses several case studies, most of them rooted in Africa, to illustrate how this shift took place. Classifications of refugees, for example, were the product of decisions made in specific contexts. The interventions of UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) in Burundi and Congo in 1961 redefined whom it could help, and where, while the Organisation of African Unity's changed description of "refugee" altered the ground for intervention at the end of that decade. Similarly, responses to successive refugee crises in Africa helped to recategorize the UNHCR's operations: from the development-focused model that governed "refugee settlements" in the 1970s and 1980s to the emergency relief emphasized after the Rwandan genocide.

The tools that aid workers used were vital in translating this codified knowledge into practice. Glasman traces the history of the mid-upper arm circumference tape (MUAC, a device to measure malnutrition in children) to illustrate the power of such everyday technologies. MUAC's development mirrored the pursuit of "universal" needs: a one-size-fits-all method that rendered intervention quantifiable and "evidence-based." It worked because it was durable, was easy to use, and could be rolled out at scale. Yet its flaws also revealed much about the aid industry such quantification made: not only were there disagreements about what constituted "malnourished," but MUAC was also criticized for flattening out contextual factors in favor of "universal" indicators. Similar tensions surfaced in the Sphere project, an attempt to draw up minimum standards for intervention that emerged following the nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector's muddled response to the Rwandan genocide. Although Sphere later became an important reference point, its attempts to define "universal" benchmarks were beset by disagreements. As Glasman notes, "indicators are never *only* scientific" (p. 137). In this case, they

were framed through negotiation of scientific, political, and cultural differences. When Sphere launched its final document in 1998, indeed, several prominent agencies refused to sign up to it.

This book opens new ways of analyzing the principles of humanitarian intervention. It belongs to a wave of scholarship, now reaching maturity, that has completely rethought the history of humanitarian relief over the last decade. It can also be read alongside books like Tom Scott-Smith's *On an Empty Stomach: Two Hundred Years of Hunger Relief* (2020) and research on "Aidland" developed by ethnographers in the 2010s. Indeed, Glasman's ability to navigate these various methodologies is a key selling point of this book. The text moves fluidly between arguments built from archival research, oral histories, and analysis of gray literature. The most insightful—and most vibrant—sections of the book, however, are built on first-hand accounts gathered while shadowing aid officials in Cameroon. Glasman's detailed reconstructions of a day registering refugees for UNHCR at Kenzou, and time spent following a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) nutritional survey in Adamawa, provide a rich insight into the day-to-day mechanics of humanitarianism that is so often missing from books like this. They also remind us of the humanity at the heart of aid delivery—with a healthy dose of humor too, as this brief interaction at Kenzou illustrates: "Some minutes later, a woman starts gesturing grandly. She has just gotten a ProGres [UNHCR] report for herself and the father of her children, who also has children with other women. Now they are on the same household document, so it is official. She is triumphant, laughing loudly: 'There's the marriage certificate!' Everyone laughs" (p. 192).

There is one question that goes unanswered, however. What impact might this book have on the aid sector? Reading the text, my mind kept returning to a conversation I had with its author in Berlin, sometime in 2015, during which we talked

at length about the relevance of history to humanitarian policymakers. I had just completed a project that involved substantial collaboration with NGOs and was full of enthusiasm for its possibilities. Glasman, by contrast, was more circumspect. You might hope to make yourself heard, he suggested, but would aid workers and officials listen? And, even if they did, would anything change as a result? It was meant as a provocation, but in the intervening years I have often recalled that discussion while working with colleagues from humanitarian agencies. I thought about it again while reading the concluding chapter of this book, in which Glasman argues that history “might eventually become a resource for reproblematising, or even repoliticising, human needs” (p. 250). Given what he had written about their very visible shortcomings, I wondered, how did he think colleagues in the humanitarian sector would respond to it? And, more important, what would they do about it?

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