



Towards a Conceptualisation of Relational Humanitarianism

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Abstract

In this article we suggest that the call for widening participation as part of the quest for a more localised humanitarianism has overlooked the clash of ethical registers that this would entail. We show that the formal script of the professionalised humanitarian system operates with an individualised ethics, while multiple other actors that exist alongside the humanitarian system operate with a relational ethical register. Based on a literature review on civic humanitarianism and humanitarianism embedded in social practice, we explore dimensions of the web of social interaction within which humanitarian practices often take place. We ask how to conceptualise these humanitarian relationships when relationships in themselves are understood as compromising humanitarian principles. Inspired by decolonial perspectives and relational ontologies and ethics, we then identify key dimensions of a relational humanitarianism: solidarity, responsibility and justice; identity and belonging; social distance and proximity; and temporality. In conclusion we suggest that for calls for localisation to succeed in genuinely changing power relations and practices, better understanding and recognition of relational ethical registers that operate alongside the formal script of the professionalised humanitarian system is required.

Keywords: humanitarianism; civic humanitarianism; humanitarian acts embedded in social practice; relational ethics; localisation

Introduction

Since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, localisation of humanitarian aid has been placed firmly on the agenda. ‘Localisation’ – the process of better engaging local and national actors in humanitarian action – is intended to transfer more power to organisations currently partnering with international organisations in the existing humanitarian system, while continuing to recognise the vital role of international organisations (PLAN International, 2021; Roepstorff, 2020). With the argument of ‘widening participation’ (Mohamed-Saleem, 2020), localisation may be understood as an attempt to engage with – and shift power to – actors who have traditionally not been part of the professionalised, often global north-dominated, humanitarian system. Khan and Kontinen (2022: 3) argue that localisation

requires in-depth knowledge of local contexts: it requires reflection on how international norms and organisations interact with local ones (Acharya, 2004) and how the culture and practices of international organisations interact with local practices (Pincock *et al.*, 2021).

Localisation is described by Dijkzeul (2021) as ‘high hopes, many disillusion, and only limited progress’. There is progress in shifting rhetoric and thinking, but this shift has not been reflected in practice. For example, there has been no real increase in funding for local actors and most local and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) continue ‘to operate as sub-contractors, with limited influence’ (Obrecht *et al.*, 2022: 226; see also Gómez, 2021). The limited progress may be explained by the continued unwillingness of powerful humanitarian actors to formally include a more contextualised mode of humanitarian assistance, which



is often understood to challenge humanitarianisms' universality as reflected in the Humanitarian Charter and humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality. It also represents a fear of losing control on the part of those powerful actors within the current humanitarian system (Cropp, 2019): a general unwillingness to undermine the power of existing institutions by changing the setup of the top-down, global north dominated system.

In this article, we show that among the international, national and local actors that are present in a humanitarian crisis, there are contradictory ethical registers operating. These registers range from an individualist ethic in the professionalised humanitarian system to a more relational ethical register situated in civic and socially embedded humanitarian acts. We argue that the clashing rationalities that emerge from a tension between an individualist versus a relational logic should be part of the discussion on localisation of humanitarian practice and why it may not have succeeded.

We situate this article in close proximity to the current localisation debate. Critical discussions on localisation have identified the need to better define what is meant by 'the local' (Roepstorff, 2020, 2022) and *where* the local is (Mac Ginty, 2015; Shuayb, 2022). They have also argued for the need to reform the system to allow for shifting power relations and funding (Bennett *et al.*, 2016; Gidron and Carver, 2022; Gingerich and Cohen, 2015). In this article, we focus instead on the ethical registers and everyday practices of humanitarianism. Based in a literature review, we explore acts of civic and socially embedded humanitarianism and identify main features of those broader humanitarian acts, particularly associated with their relationality. We aim to make visible a wider register of assistance that takes place in crises. We argue that for genuine localisation to happen, with a shift in power and influence to other actors, there is a need to understand and recognise the relational ethics that operate alongside the formal script in a humanitarian response.

We conducted a review of the literature on civic humanitarianism and humanitarian acts situated in social practice. To narrow down the field, we focused on work that addressed situations of violent conflict and displacement. We searched for literature using keywords of relevance to civic and socially embedded humanitarianism, such as alternative conceptions of civic humanitarianism described below. The two fields of literature are not established fields of study, but we specifically searched for publications that can speak to these two areas of humanitarian practice outside the professionalised humanitarian system and contribute to develop a framework for defining, understanding and analysing a relational humanitarianism. Our literature search and

analysis were exploratory rather than a systematic review because the papers we looked for represent a diverse set of contributions without a predefined conceptual frame. From the initial search, we adopted an interpretive approach to categorise the literature into two broad but not mutually exclusive fields: civic humanitarian action and humanitarianism embedded in social practice. From here, we emphasised two dimensions in our interpretation and discussions: first, how academic research approaches these broad fields of humanitarian acts, and second, what kind of acts and ethical registers are addressed and documented in the literature. Before we present the analysis of the literature, we discuss definitions of humanitarianism in this work.

Background: Definitions of Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism is not a fixed entity but a slowly changing narrative (Edkins, 2003). The current discourse on localisation requires reflection on how humanitarianism's definitions, components, principles, actors and practices might change. Aloudat and Khan (2021) argue that a clear distinction must be made between humanitarianism and humanitarian aid. Humanitarianism is the active belief in the equal value of all human life and the consequent action to assist others, protect their rights, and accept and promote their agency and worldview. In a broad and more general sense, humanitarianism is about saving lives and alleviating suffering based on the value of human life. The current form of humanitarian *aid* is the formalised system of governments, agencies and organisations, which may be defined as a 'network of inter-connected institutional and operational entities that receive funds, directly or indirectly from public donors and private sources to enhance, support or substitute for in-country responses in the provision of humanitarian assistance' (Knox Clarke, 2018: 32). In a specific crisis, the humanitarian ecosystem consists of a diversity of humanitarian acts in addition to humanitarian aid provided by the humanitarian system. In other words, humanitarianism includes different paradigms, practices and ethical registers that operate in parallel and co-exist (Hilhorst, 2018; Gidron and Carver, 2022; Slim, 2022).

When considering the origin and history of the humanitarian system, it tends to be a history of institutions and actors originating and operating from the global north. The humanitarian system has established what may be understood as a formal script originating in the classical Dunantist perspective (Hilhorst, 2018) based on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, intended to

ensure that humanitarian aid is provided based on needs only. A significant distinction between the actors of the humanitarian system and a number of other actors acting within the broader understanding of humanitarianism is the nature of the relationships between the giver and the receiver of aid. For example, the question of whether humanitarianism's boundaries are determined by helping people who are strangers or can include people with close geographical, kinship or ethno-national ties has long been debated (Laqua, 2014; Olliff, 2018). These considerations have been identified in conversations around the concepts of 'solidarity' (De Genova and Tazzioli *et al.*, 2022), 'justice' (Tazzioli and Walters, 2019) and 'humanitarianism' itself (Edkins, 2003).

Some authors identify the 'humanitarian space' as an arena of contestation and a 'battlefield of knowledge' (Long and Long, 1992; Roepstorff, 2022) where different interests, principles and values 'are pitched against each other' (Roepstorff, 2022: 611). Cropp (2019), for example, identifies two scripts in the humanitarian system: an official script, formulated around the laws and principles, and an unofficial script which is contextual and more relational and adaptable to the mix of actors occupying the humanitarian arena. While these two scripts are deeply related, Cropp (2019) shows that they remain separate: a formal, public framework and representation of the humanitarian system and the more alternative script embedded in informal responses to local challenges. The informal scripts take place in the realms of everyday practice of humanitarian workers and Cropp shows that it is left to individuals in an organisation to figure out how to act at any given time (see also Hilhorst and Schmiemann, 2002). This informal and more relational script is knowingly taking place among humanitarian workers 'on the ground'. However, the formal script is not changing accordingly. Especially in the context where localisation is an explicit aim, this is problematic, as the formal script is used to block opportunities for widening participation and shifting power to local humanitarians.

The humanitarian acts we explore in this article are those that are part of the wider humanitarian ecosystem – outside the system – and our focus is on those engaged in such acts who do not need to follow the formal script of the system. For humanitarian acts that are not part of the humanitarian system, but are still understood as humanitarian, relationships are contingent on the social situation from which they emerge. There is no limit to the type of relationships that may arise or already exist between the giver and the receiver. Here, we consider two different, but not mutually exclusive, forms of such practices: first, 'civic humanitarianism' – formal and informal community service, collective action and

political involvement often operating alongside the humanitarian system but not officially included. The second form of humanitarian practice is more embedded in the social context and to a large extent governed by the specific relations that already exist or are formed in the act of assistance – not always described as humanitarian acts and commonly overlooked in academic discussions on humanitarianism (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Pacitto, 2015). The more 'hidden' body of work addresses acts of assistance that may be categorised as humanitarian but where both the acts and the research on those acts are situated outside a humanitarian discourse. Before describing this socially embedded humanitarianism, we discuss the new wave of literature on civic humanitarianism and some of the key features of these practices and the resultant literature.

Civic Humanitarianism

There has been a proliferation of studies in recent years on humanitarian acts that are largely located outside the humanitarian system. An umbrella concept for these acts can be 'civic humanitarianism', in which we understand the civic act to broadly refer to formal and informal community service, collective action and political involvement (Adler and Goggin, 2005). This broad meaning is reflected in the many labels for 'civic humanitarianism', which indicates that these acts represent a wide set of practices and motivations: 'citizen aid/humanitarianism' (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019; Jumbert and Pascucci, 2021; Schwittay, 2019), 'volunteer humanitarianism' (Sandri, 2018), 'grassroot humanitarianism' (McGee and Pelham, 2018), 'solidarity humanitarianism' (Rozakou, 2017), 'everyday humanitarianism' (Lewis, 2019), 'subversive humanitarianism' (Vandervoort, 2019).

The scholarly attention towards civic humanitarianism increased substantially with the refugee reception crisis in Europe in 2015 (Vandervoort, 2019). The literature engages with a range of activities from assistance that 'transforms forced migrants into recipients of aid' (Vandervoort, 2019: 264) to acts of solidarity. Both in its practice and in the writing about these practices, these civic acts operate in a humanitarian space, in close association with the humanitarian system and often thought of as filling a humanitarian void (McGee and Pelham, 2018). A common example in this literature focuses on volunteers helping refugee arrivals – often against the interest of the hosting government (Vandervoort, 2019). Civic humanitarians are volunteers in smaller and larger initiatives that generally do not have to adhere to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence and sometimes see their solidarity as a radical alternative

to humanitarianism (Rouzakou, 2017; Vandervoort, 2019). Their motivation is nevertheless based in broader humanitarian concerns defined above as saving lives (Sandri, 2018).

Overall the literature on civic humanitarianism tends to share the gaze of the literature on professionalised humanitarianism: it is a representation of assistance seen from those who are helping (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019) rather than a relational perspective. With some few exceptions (e.g. Brun, 2010; Lewis, 2019; Sahin Mencutek, 2021), the emphasis is on the northern helper assisting in Europe, rather than southern or south-south initiatives. It rarely considers assistance provided by refugees, migrants and others, despite an emerging body of work on Refugee-Led Organisations and Initiatives (Alio *et al.*, 2020; El Abed *et al.*, 2023; Sahin Mencutek, 2021).

Hence, who counts as humanitarians is rather narrowly defined and tends to follow the professionalised humanitarian discourse with a clear continuity to the literature concerning the northern-based humanitarian system. Civic humanitarianism and the literature that studies it may be considered an alternative to the humanitarian system – but the helper-centric emphasis instead ends up reproducing the system’s one-way relationship between helper and receiver (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010; Radice, 2022).

Despite this helper-centric northern approach, some of the literature incorporates the transformation of perspective observed in the helper: a shift in focus from humanitarian concerns to activism and political considerations about the underlying causes of human suffering and loss of lives (Sandri, 2018; McGee and Pelham, 2018; Vandervoort, 2019). The transformation in the helper’s focus suggests a gradual building of relations and more active engagement with the reality by the helpers towards those they help. Sandri (2018: 76), for example, shows how the volunteers working in the Jungle in Calais formed friendships with each other and with refugees, which ‘strengthened the volunteers’ sense of purpose, as they felt they had a responsibility towards their friends living in the camp.

Rouzakou (2017) takes the relational argument even further with her work on ‘solidarity humanitarianism’, where she applies relationality and solidarity to challenge the ‘established schemata of humanitarianism’ (p. 99). She shows how volunteers in Greece, calling themselves ‘solidarians’, did not consider ‘the people they encountered in the streets as “beneficiaries” nor their activities as “services” or “humanitarian aid”’ but strived for a more egalitarian relationship of gift-giving. The groups of volunteers Rozakou worked with felt that the practices based in solidarity had been lost with

the institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of the voluntary sector and the humanitarian system that they worked alongside (Rouzakou, 2016, 2017).

The wide spectrum of civic humanitarian practices discussed here largely tends to maintain boundaries between helper and helped and continues to be dominated by the perspective and gaze of a white helper originating in the global north. Yet there are some insights for the discussion on a relational humanitarianism. First, there is a recognition of the relationships that gradually develop in, and as a consequence of, the humanitarian act – a relationship that has not yet been fully acknowledged in the official script of humanitarianism. Second, there is a blurring boundary between humanitarian assistance and more solidarity-based activities seeking to assist both for survival and for sustainable transformation. Hence, a justice perspective is more prominent within a civic humanitarianism than in the professionalised humanitarianism.

Humanitarianism Embedded in Social Practice

Alleviating suffering and saving lives is not just a professional exercise or act of solidarity, but it is part of the fabric of social life. In everyday life, there is a fluidity of caretaker versus care receiver roles – with the majority of people moving between the two roles at different stages in their lives. Social practices of caretaking that aim to save lives and alleviate suffering in times of crisis can be found around the world. There is a growing body of work focusing on these acts, but they are still treated as marginal within humanitarian studies. As the 2022 *State of the Humanitarian System* argues,

From capital cities to villages, the survivors of crisis draw on a wide range of overlapping resource flows and support networks. These forms of support are poorly linked to, understood or even acknowledged by humanitarian actors, partly because of their informality and complexity, but also due to lack of time and motivation in the humanitarian system to understand the contexts in which it operates. (Obrecht *et al.*, 2022: 70)

Gaining an overview over studies on such embedded humanitarian acts is thus not easy. Knowledge on socially embedded humanitarianism can be found in a wide range of disciplines and these studies are still predominantly placed outside debates on ‘humanitarianism’ – with the exception of work within disaster studies (Lucatello and Gómez, 2022; Roepstorff, 2022). Most of the work on what could be called socially embedded humanitarianism instead can be found in related fields and in situations that, if humanitarian

actors were present, would have been described in humanitarian terms. We find them in research on urban displacement (Sanyal, 2021; Archer and Dodman, 2017), community resilience and social security (Bankoff, 2007; Hilhorst, 2018), philanthropy (Bornstein, 2009), hospitality (Brun, 2010), religious aid practices (Borchgrevink, 2022; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Paccito, 2015), civil society (Bankoff, 2007) and a range of other topics. Without claiming to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive, we discuss key literatures that study humanitarian acts as situated in socio-cultural practice – often without reference to humanitarianism.

The most common embedded humanitarian acts take place within local communities and networks and based on geographical cohabitation – whether between long-time neighbours or as a consequence of displacement. Community-based actors are the first responders and often build on pre-existing relationships and social contracts in their provisions of aid (Cretney, 2015). Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) – former and present – also form community-based structures of support in rural settlements, urban contexts and protracted camp-based settings (Horst, 2006; Jansen, 2018 Pincock *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, local hosts are central in housing refugees (Brun, 2010). Those involved in providing community-based humanitarian aid include groups such as neighbourhood associations and committees, councils of elders, federations of slum dwellers, local businesspeople and trade associations. While there are blurred boundaries between some of these initiatives and civic humanitarianism, the literature we discuss here does not use this term or any of the related ones mentioned above. Furthermore, this literature does not distinguish helper and helped as fundamentally and permanently distinct – rather than ‘helping the stranger’, this humanitarianism is embedded in social structures that encompass both helper and helped into a dynamic relationship that stretches beyond the here and now.

In situations where uncertainty is prevalent, such as in disaster-prone areas, social systems already exist to support one another in times of need, often based on close relationships of reciprocity. Rotating credit associations, cooperative societies and self-help organisations are examples of such systems, which are based on the expectation that aid provided today will be repaid when called upon in the future (Bankoff, 2007). Especially in contexts where formal types of insurances and support mechanisms are absent, associations and social networks committed to individual and community welfare are essential to save lives and alleviate suffering (Bankoff, 2007; Horst, 2006).

Brković (2016, 2017) adopts the concept of ‘vernacular humanitarianism’ as a ‘humanitarianism from within’

rather than from below to indicate that the lives of ‘savers’ and ‘saved’ are exposed to the same socio-political environment. Brković (2016) suggests that professional and vernacular humanitarianisms are similar in their understanding of shared responsibility for the lives and well-being of other people, they operate outside the Westphalian state-centric system, and they share a moral sentiment of compassion, ethics and politics. Yet they differ in their concept of life: a vernacular humanitarianism understands life as embedded in shared realities, a politics of life without any clear-cut differentiation between people who need saving and people who save and with no set recipe of how to save.

Humanitarian aid is often provided within networks of family and wider kin relations (tribe, clan, etc.), within which individuals can draw on each other to mobilise resources during times of protracted need (Ikanda, 2019). These kinship-networks – culturally significant systems of long-term social relationships – will have socialised roles of responsibility that regulate expectations and responsibilities for how to take care of each other. Kinship situates humanitarian actions through relations rather than universal principles. It is a key component of social capital (Tan-Mullins *et al.*, 2007) and can be a crucial part of local and transnational social insurance mechanisms created to mitigate risks in situations of high levels of uncertainty and low formal insurance systems. This is true irrespective of whether those understood as kin have actually met or feel familiarity. Furthermore, in many situations, forms of caretaking can be rationalised through a vocabulary of kinship responsibilities between non-kin members (Bornstein, 2012). Here, the language of kinship is used to create a sense of responsibility based on affinity, despite helper and helped not being related.

Some argue that familial acts of good-doing do not equate to humanitarianism because one primarily helps another out of duty, not out of compassion or by their own conviction (Barnett and Stein, 2012). This critique suggests a narrow understanding of humanitarianism as a Western project to help ‘strangers in need’ abiding by humanitarian principles. It is based on racialised perceptions of who engages in aid and who benefits from it, while excluding the possibility that practically anyone can both provide and be in need of assistance (Sinatti and Horst, 2015).

The literature on diaspora adds further complexity to this discussion on responsibilities that are framed in kinship terms. Diaspora are transnational communities of people who are engaged in their countries of origin through economic, political and/or socio-cultural contributions (Horst *et al.*, 2010). Their humanitarian acts may involve sending remittances (Ademolu, 2020),

establishing refugee-led organisations to help those who remain in their origin countries (Olliff, 2018) or engaging with international NGOs (INGOs) to lobby for humanitarian involvement or to enhance contextual knowledge of, and dialogue with, recipient communities of humanitarian aid (Horst *et al.*, 2016). Their motivations are often an extension of those already discussed, based on kinship responsibilities that remain relevant despite geographical distance.

Besides geographical proximity and kinship, religion is a central factor in shaping humanitarian acts – with religion and humanitarianism sharing a long and contentious history. First, religion is a historically important community builder. It often brings with it a set of shared norms and moral codes that are negotiated on an individual, community and global level, and that guide the lives of its followers – including expectations to help those in need (Anstorp and Horst, 2021). Religion can connect several localities through these shared values. A religious institution, such as a church or a mosque, establishes a community in its specific locality but also connects to an overarching (transnational) community of co-religionists through their adherents' perception of shared experiences and values, combined with the material presence of religious institutions and laymen that mediate knowledge and practice (Levitt, 2008). The sense of shared community among co-religionists can extend far beyond the mere spiritual domain – including the humanitarian domain. In Islamic thought, for example, if someone dies of hunger the whole community is held accountable (Kraff, 2005). Despite these interconnections between religion and humanitarianism, since the late nineteenth century the humanitarian regime has increasingly been articulated in secular terms (Ager and Ager, 2011), though several authors have addressed this misrepresentation (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Paccito, 2015).

We can identify a number of important relational elements in the various strands of literature that explore humanitarianism embedded in social practice. First, proximity, both in the sense of geographical and socio-cultural proximity, is established by long-term social relations with accompanying social contracts, institutions and responsibilities, or a sense of shared community, identity and belonging. Second, witnessing, where a 'third party' feels responsible to provide humanitarian aid based on seeing the other suffer, is commonly based on long-term physical closeness but can also be extended to newcomers in the community. Having been in need of assistance oneself, recognising oneself in the other, is a third relational element identified in the literature discussed. Those who once received assistance in times of need are now in a position

to provide it to others, leading to an 'asymmetrical reciprocity' in the sense that within a larger group, the people one receives assistance from are not the same as those one provides humanitarian support to. These realities challenge the binary between helper and helped as fluctuating and unstable.

Expanding the Ethical Register in Humanitarianism Based in a Relational Ontology

The humanitarian ecosystem consists of much more than the formal script of the humanitarian system, including practices that are more relational in their ethical registers. We suggest that a more systematic effort is needed to define and establish this relational approach to humanitarianism in order to move forward with the localisation agenda. The current system is still holding on to an individualist ethical register which focuses on the helper, sees helper and helped as fixed positions rather than (asymmetrically) reciprocal relationships, and materialises in the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. By engaging with the encounters that take place through humanitarian acts, we can contribute to expanding the ethical register that informs humanitarianism in ways that are closer to social practice.

Drawing on the literature on civic humanitarianism and humanitarianism embedded in social practice – with inspiration from relational ethics, such as feminist ethics of care (Held, 2010; Robinson, 2011), communitarian or contextualised ethics (Gouws and van Zyl, 2015; Imafidon, 2022; Metz, 2013; Rapatsa, 2016) and decolonial ethics (Dunford, 2017; Hutchings, 2019) – we identify four elements of a relational ethics: (1) solidarity, responsibility and justice; (2) identity and belonging; (3) social distance and proximity; and (4) temporality. Before we summarise these four dimensions, we set out what we mean by a relational lens.

A relational ethics centres 'the self on a web of social relationships' in a concrete context (Gouws and van Zyl, 2015:172). It emphasises the 'doing' of a relationship and the responsibilities and obligations towards others. In a relational ethics and ontology, there must be an emphasis on the particularity and situatedness of the specific context in which the relation takes place: the connections that bind the two parties together (Lawson, 2007). Subjects are produced 'always already in and through relations with other subjects' (Edkins, 2003: 256). In contrast, the outcome of assuming a universal humanity as maintained in the official script of humanitarianism has been the process of essentialising people to their 'bare' and 'biological lives' (Agamben,

1998; Brun, 2016; Fassin, 2012; Fast, 2015), removing all possibilities of recognising relationality and connectedness. The universal right to life is often translated into a decontextualised understanding of the individual, where humanitarianism is primarily concerned with making people survive. In this context, there is less relevance directed towards what kind of lives individuals have lived or will continue to live in the future (Fassin, 2012; Brun, 2016).

This universality may be questioned through the inherent unequal relationship between giver and receiver in humanitarianism, where the receiver is placed in a dependent relationship to the helper (Fast, 2015). In the helper-centric literature discussed above, the receiver of assistance is represented as a faceless, biological bare minimum being while the helper is attributed with agency, reflexivity and identity. Leaning on decolonial scholarship, we contest the idea of universal humanity. A relational ethics emerges from differently situated positions and enables inclusion of positions on the margins or in the borderlands of the hegemony (Dunford, 2017). It also allows us to recognise the long history of relationships that have preceded and shaped present-day relationships between helper and helped (Malkki, 1996), as well as the potential of a shared future.

A humanitarian practice understood within a relational ethical register goes beyond saving biological lives and can potentially disrupt the differentiation of different classes of people into savers and saved. As states Brković (2016:18): 'lives that needed saving were not perceived as bare, but as constituted from and constitutive of social relations in which they existed, just like the lives of those who offered help.' In a relational humanitarianism that is based on a shared reality, a shared history and future, the relationship between helper and helped becomes less of a static binary: within a relational ethic and ontology, everyone may potentially become both helper and helped and people understand relationships of humanitarianism as interdependent. Thus, we propose an expanded ethical register that takes the relational as its premise in understanding humanitarian acts and consists of four – partly overlapping – elements:

(1) **Solidarity, responsibility and justice:** Common for many of the studies discussed above is the documentation of motivation for assisting based in a moral responsibility and a solidarity that is developed from a sense of justice and the need to help. Solidarity here refers to the shared responsibility in a group which does not need to be geographically confined but could refer to a global sense of community (Tazzioli and Walters, 2019). Following from this is also a transformative ambition embedded in the

motivation to help among civic humanitarianism and socially embedded humanitarianism. A sense of responsibility is constituted in relationships with others which leads to practical action (Brun, 2009). Witnessing situations that lead to the suffering of fellow human beings, or to shared suffering, can create political subjects with a strong sense of responsibility to assist others and a wish to challenge structural conditions (Horst, 2019; Horst and Lysaker, 2021). Contrary to professional humanitarianism, humanitarian acts based in relational ethics would often encompass a justice perspective: a struggle for justice and humanity simultaneously (Slim, 2022). As we showed above, many of those who assist express a motivation to provide help that might change the causes of the disaster. Hence a relational humanitarianism enables a more political response with the aim to assist beyond mere survival.

- (2) **Identity and belonging:** Responsibility 'derives from those relations through which identity is constructed' (Massey, 2004:10). Through acts of solidarity, caring relations of special value are formed: relations are built on interdependence between inherently vulnerable humans who over time are in shifting roles of caretaking and being cared for (Held, 2006). Caring for others is not a charitable act born from an abstract desire to help 'strangers in need', but rather a fundamental practice of our everyday lives and a necessary feature of human survival (Robinson, 2013). Ethics of care can address persons morally 'in their most distant as well as their closest relations' across different geographical locations and social positions (Held, 2010:116). This dynamic relational process may be based on a direct responsibility towards concrete individuals based on existing relationships such as religion, kinship or a general feeling of community or indeed shared humanity, but also on establishing new relationships through which new identities and forms of belonging may be shaped. Through a relational understanding of humanitarian acts, relationships are changing and consequently challenge the binary between helper and helped that is so prominent in professionalised humanitarianism. When the binary between helper and helped unsettles, there may be, as some of the studies we referred to above show, implications for the act of assisting: for the motivation, the expectations and responsibilities on the part of both the helper and the receiver of assistance.
- (3) **Unsettling the experience of social and geographical proximity and distance:** At the core of the formal script of humanitarianism is helping the

stranger and the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. However, neutrality is not a requirement of humanitarian law (Slim, 2022). In a relational ethics, the concern may not just be about whether assistance takes place between people who are strangers or known to each other, but rather about the nature of the relationship between different subject positions regardless of the experience of physical or social distance or proximity. The need to help, Malkki states, emerges ‘from a number of different sources, including the particularities of people’s own subjectivities and subject positions, and their felt obligations to specific relationships defined by things like occupation, nationality, and an internationalist political imagination’ (2015: 51). This understanding of responsibility and responsiveness can be discussed as an ethics of encounter across social difference that bridges distance and proximity, and allows for ‘interdependence, permeability and co-constitution’ (Beausoleil, 2015: 3).

Decolonial scholarship starts with ‘pluriversality’ rather than universality to indicate the ways in which values expressed in the act of helping are constructed ‘in a manner that takes seriously, shows respect for, and emerges from communication and exchange across multiple places, cultures and cosmovisions’ (Dunford, 2017: 389). The ‘pluriverse’ addresses the question of how to cultivate a practical ethic of coexistence and collaboration with others in an ontologically plural and radically hierarchical world (Hutchings, 2019). Pluriversality helps to understand the desire to assist from locally situated practices for exchange, mutual support and solidarity with others. The scales of engagement do not need to be related to a particular location or a particular social network. A relational humanitarianism enables more attention to encounters and relationships that form and play out in the humanitarian act which again can help to understand the experience of distance and proximity in the relationship between helper and the helped.

- (4) **Temporality:** The professionalised humanitarian system discussed above has not critically engaged with temporality, which is a system of practice based on acting in the now to deal with emergencies to save lives, where the past and the future are both irrelevant (Brun, 2016). In a relational ethic, there is more emphasis on who the helper and the helped are, their social context, their histories and their future prospects – independently and in relation to one another. Temporality is relevant in multiple

ways in the studies we discussed above: As shown by Rozakou’s (2017) work from Greece there are temporalities of solidarity, ‘specifically how the memory of struggles and of acts of solidarity are reactivated in the present’ (De Genova and Tazzioli *et al.*, 2022: 808). Solidarity and vernacular humanitarianisms have evolved over time to established practices and joint expectations of assistance in times of crisis. The shared history that comes with a cultural register where assistance is integrated in the system of co-existence, is often accompanied by envisioning a common future together where the need and responsibility to help – and to receive assistance – is always present.

Conclusions: Towards a Relational Humanitarianism

In this article we have identified some of the key dimensions of a relational humanitarianism emerging from two bodies of literature that we have termed ‘civic humanitarianism’ and ‘humanitarianism embedded in social practice’. A relational humanitarianism entails what humanitarian actors in control of the formal script fear may taint the project of neutrality (Slim, 2022) and have worked hard to avoid: the realisation that the helper and the helped are part of the same life world in which the roles of who needs assistance and who provides that assistance may shift over time. We have shown that within the humanitarian ecosystem, relational humanitarianism plays a prominent part.

By defining a relational humanitarianism, we advocate for an understanding and recognition of humanitarian assistance that is closer to people’s practices and the multitude of acts that take place in most crises. Analysing humanitarian acts through relationality means that a greater emphasis can be placed on solidarity, responsibility and justice. It enables an analysis of more mutual ways of understanding humanitarian practice where the motivations for assisting are based in the sociality of subject positions. There is a need to further study the relations that form the basis for civic and socially embedded humanitarianism.

Tazzioli and Walters (2019) clearly distinguish between solidarity work and the professionalised humanitarian system. They caution against conflating the two, as migrant solidarity networks have often been criminalised, while the professionalised humanitarian systems often work with the state on migration governance and are complicit in the criminalisation. Slim (2022), however, suggests that both professionalised – or in his words principled – humanitarianism and solidarity work are humanitarian. He terms solidarity

work ‘humanitarian resistance’. Resistance, Slim maintains, is explicit in its ‘recognition of side-taking, enmity and confrontation’ (2022: 8) and has been an established practice in past as well as contemporary crises such as Syria, Ukraine, Myanmar and Tigray.

We are not attempting to romanticise relational humanitarianism. These humanitarian acts are deeply embedded in power relations that control who gets access to assistance and the priorities of assistance. Caring relationships, for example, may represent hierarchical distinctions between dependent others to be cared for and autonomous individuals who are free and resourced to care (Beasley and Bacchi, 2007; Drotbohm, 2022). Further discussion of the relationality of humanitarian practice within and outside the humanitarian system enables a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power relations in a crisis. Approaching relationality can help move forward uncomfortable analyses of power relations that relate to humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.

For localisation processes to succeed in changing power relations and practices, a widening of participation in the professionalised humanitarian system would necessarily mean sharing power and resources more equally. The solution is not, in our understanding, to include all humanitarian acts into the professionalised humanitarian system. In fact, we would envisage that this could be problematic and lead to a ‘depoliticisation’ and move away from relationality and everyday humanitarian practices. Rather than advocating for incorporating these humanitarian acts and actors into the humanitarian system, we suggest that there is a need for increased acknowledgement of these actors’ importance for understanding the sociality of any crisis in the broader humanitarian ecosystem that forms in a crisis. Acknowledging these initiatives does not mean assuming that local response mechanisms alone can deal with crises. We argue that it is essential to understand the different ethical registers underlying different humanitarian practices, and that for localisation and widening participation to truly be successful, relational ethics needs to be incorporated into the formal script of the humanitarian system.

Acknowledgements

The work with this paper comes under the Research Council of Norway funded project *Holding Aid Accountable: Relational Humanitarianism in Protracted Crisis (AidAccount)*, project number 301024. The authors thank the project members of the *AidAccount* project whose feedback and lively discussions were instrumental in developing this paper: Henrik Buljo Anstorp, Eva

Chalkiadaki, Eria Serwajja, Emmanuel Viga, Maja Simonsen Nilsen, Hilde Refstie, Danesh Jayatilaka, Alikhan Mohamed, Ahmed Mousa, Mohamed Aden Hassan and Marta Bivand Erdal. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers.

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