

# Editor's Introduction

Phoebe Shambaugh

PhD candidate, Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester; [phoebe.shambaugh@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:phoebe.shambaugh@manchester.ac.uk)

After a special curated issue on humanitarian history and communications (*JHA*, 3:2) and a themed one on the politics of infectious disease (*JHA*, 3:3), it is therefore apt that the *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* publishes a general issue of articles that challenge us to think with both new research methods and partnerships, and to reflect on the events which have brought us here. If there is a thread which runs through this issue, perhaps it is most concretely focused on the relationship between humanitarianism – as an ideology, a discourse and a practice – and the people it proposes to help. This collection of articles and reflections encourages us to think again, and deeply, about a long-standing question in the professional and academic field, that of the role of the narrator and the ‘filter’ (see Pacoma *et al.*, ‘Resilience Unfiltered: Local Understandings of Resilience after Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban City, Philippines’, this issue) in humanitarian response. In each their own way, these articles talk about transformation – some more overtly than others – and ask us to consider the implications of this proposition.

This issue also marks our entry into the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each of the previous general issue introductions have used the pandemic as a thread; this one will be no exception. As we enter a new phase of ‘opening-up’ (I write in February 2022) and ‘return to normalcy’ in the Global North, we mark heightening tensions and renewed violence geopolitically, with new forms of misinformation, posturing and political division. The pandemic continues to heighten inequalities in wealth and quality of life, both within and across national borders. Nevertheless, in this issue, COVID-19 is perhaps most notable by its absence – this is itself the new normalcy, where the pandemic is reduced to allusions to remote research methods and included in research limitations. It is not yet clear whether the distanced collaborations enforced by the travel restrictions contribute to redistribution of authorial power when writing on humanitarianism, or simply a filtering of common hierarchies through new lenses.

The articles in this issue offer a range of methodological and conceptual approaches to consider these

questions. Ranging from secondary reviews and discourse analysis to qualitative household surveys and participatory action research, they encourage us as academics and as practitioners to reflect on how we understand, learn and listen to people affected by conflict and disaster.

The first research article, by Diego Meza, explores the discourses of humanitarianism, notably resilience and compassion as tools of governance and coercive power in the response to internal displacement in Colombia under President Santos (2010–18). Meza argues that through these dual languages of humanitarian governance, ‘the political problem of dispossession’ by the neoliberal developmental state ‘is transformed into an administrative problem’ which is normalised and depoliticised. In doing so, he contributes to a long lineage of analyses unpacking the instrumentalisation of humanitarian language to fulfil coercive functions.

Meza’s paper offers a critical preface to the next three research articles, which each in their own way reflect on the relation between the humanitarian sector and its constituent as a relation of power. While the topics and mode of intervention vary, this collection of articles invites us to consider the importance of local, socially embedded meanings in humanitarianism and the potential difference between local understandings and expert analyses and norms.

The first of these empirical articles, by Ara Joy Pacoma, Yvonne Su and Angelie Genotiva, is the output of collaboration with local researchers to explore and address local understandings, conceptions and expressions of resilience among people affected by disaster – in this case Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban, Philippines. This article therefore addresses literature in two directions – the first regards analyses of translations of concepts and language and the political implication for translating international normative terms into local contexts through interventions by internationally trained experts, while the second contributes to locally grounded understandings of resilience and recovery. The research proposes to counter this through the emphasis of local,

and locally embedded, lead researchers. The authors adopt the concept of ‘filtering’ to describe the process through which concepts are translated and interpreted in local context and in their research they uncover alternative meanings of resilience which are social and relational. These meanings, embedded in networks of exchange and assistance, including both local and transnational support, challenge the imported humanitarian-development definition of resilience as ‘build back better’.

While the approach taken to the concept of resilience by these first two pieces is oppositional, both are reactions to resilience as a discourse of power imported into a context through humanitarian expertise and which serves particular functions. Meza identifies this as a pedagogical lens to psychosocial support through which displaced persons are taught to recognise their own ‘resilience’ and which separates their position from political and/or redistributive solutions, while the research in Tacloban demonstrates the learned nature of the resilience concept and the processes of filtering, interpretation and syncretism in which this humanitarian discourse is embedded.

A second point of comparison between the texts lies in the social meanings given – or in the case of Colombia, denied – to resilience. While the local researchers in Tacloban sought resilience at household and community level, the discourses Meza identifies in Colombia function at the level of the individual and denies the sort of local, familial and historical connections which might lend momentum to political claims against the neoliberal state extraction which he sees as driving displacement.

The second empirical article picks up on this thread by situating individual actions regarding child marriage within broader socio-cultural dynamics. Michelle Lokot, Lisa DiPangrazio, Dorcas Acen, Veronica Gatpan and Ronald Apunyo seek to complicate the standard understanding of child marriage in South Sudan as one driven by particular socio-economic and conflict dynamics that treat young girls as economic resources. Instead, the authors focus on interlocking gender norms which lead to early female marriage, specifically calling for more attention to the ‘demand side’ of child marriage, namely the social norms and expectations which incentivise men and boys to marry young girls. With this analysis, the authors argue that the standard approach, which addresses girls’ rights and education opportunities, does not sufficiently engage with the expectations of appropriate masculinity, which create ‘demand’. They suggest that these gendered expectations are themselves contributing to the continuation of inter-group conflict in the region through cattle raiding for the purpose of acquiring ‘bride price’. As such, the article echoes the call from Pacoma *et al.* to the importance of local understandings and meanings embedded in social relations of

conflict and disaster settings. It also indicates the extent to which the discourses of gendered victimisation and appeals to child rights, which underpin the interventions around child marriage, are insufficient to achieve significant change in the gendered dynamics of this part of South Sudan.

The third empirical article, by Chikezirim C Nwoke, Jennifer Becker, Sofiya Popovych, Mathew Gabriel and Logan Cochrane, further contributes to unpacking what gender transformative humanitarian action might look like in practice. Focusing on early child malnutrition intervention in the form of parent support groups (both mother and father) in north-east Nigeria, the authors explore how interventions around life-saving that are gender-sensitive contribute to transformation of specific local gender roles, while acknowledging the limitations and difficulty of affecting deeper transformation of social norms. The paper can therefore also be understood as engaging with local understandings and meanings of social relations. Like other articles in this section, it reflects an opportunity to think on the tension between social norms as collective agreements on the one hand and processes of directed social change implemented on the outside or top-down on the other.

Taken together, these four papers encourage us to reflect on notions of locality and social change embedded in humanitarian response to disasters, conflict and displacement. They provide contrasting, though complementary, analyses of the relation between aid interventions, humanitarian norms, and social change in local contexts, while reminding us that politics is always at play.

The research papers are complemented by two pieces which highlight these different registers of intervention – the personal and the political. In the field report / synthesis offered by Maelle L’Homme, the author returns us to the analysis of classical humanitarian action as defined in traditional international humanitarian law. Analysing the use and misuse of the discourse of ‘humanitarian corridors’, the author argues that the widespread use of the term challenges norms of humanitarian access to civilians in conflict settings. By creating corridors as zones of exception in which humanitarian norms apply, all other zones are normalised as non-humanitarian spaces, thereby constraining all other types and modes of access. In limiting the application of humanitarian law, the use of corridors also further enables political instrumentalisation and manipulation of humanitarian access by armed actors on all sides. In this, the author provides a useful, historically grounded analysis of the risks of mobilising this language and the challenges to humanitarianism presented by its increasingly common – and uncritical – use.

In the interview with Tony Redmond and Gareth Owen, Roísín Read leads us through an exploration of

the role of history and memory in shaping communities of practice. Both authors have shaped the careers of new generations of humanitarian practitioners, as well as colleagues and communities in the numerous contexts in which they have worked. In this discussion they reflect critically on the process of narrating this identity as it moves between intensely personal, emotional and affective on the one hand and deeply political and value-driven on the other, while also balancing the needs of honesty and the constraints of privacy and risk. At the same time, they provide reflection on one reading of the state of the humanitarian system; they are, as is acknowledged, old(er) white men at the tail end of their careers, handing over the guard to a new generation. The nostalgia which seeps through their narratives is both foundation and fodder for new forms, debates and contestations over aid relations. As Read points out in her last question, the private lives and reflexivities of humanitarians may be key to addressing the challenges and anxieties which currently wrack the sector.

These two pieces in juxtaposition highlight the challenge of humanitarian practice as an intensely political and contentious activity which is nonetheless practiced and negotiated by individual human actors with real personal relationships, affective histories and ambitious drive. As the interview by Read reminds us, these personal narratives and narrations have played a significant role in the solidification of a humanitarian professional sector, and for better or worse, these interventions and their reflections form the bedrock of humanitarian mythology. L'Homme's paper provides a less personal, but still firmly historical, reflection on the ways in which these humanitarian successes and failures

are reappropriated over time for new narratives and new political ends.

In the final paper, the op-ed by Bassett and Bradley offers a normative call for more rigorous standards in early child development and for the inclusion of children and carers in existing frameworks. In addition to the call to consider children's development more holistically within humanitarian response, the paper offers a moment to reflect on the process of setting international norms and standards and the important role this form of knowledge plays in solidifying regimes of international humanitarian expertise.

The process of compiling a general issue is an opportunity for reflection among the editors, and we hope the articles will also spark reflection among you as readers. This issue includes papers which touch on key academic debates around authorship, inclusion and locality. It brings together different constellations of authors and demonstrates the possibility of analytical and research partnerships between academics and humanitarian practitioners. We hope the collection of articles will spur your own thinking and generate critical reflections which contribute to the broader debates.

While we have found significant value in themed and curated special issues, general issues and sections remain key fora for debate and raising new topics, themes and analyses. This relies on you, as readers, to contribute reflections, reactions and rebuttals to the process. We encourage submissions from a diversity of authors, on a wide range of subjects, and would particularly encourage critical reflections from practitioners and research partnerships in the Global South.