

It's a rich man's world? Financing humanitarian aid and development in the Middle East since the mid-19th century

International Workshop
Beirut, French Institute for the Near East (Ifpo)
(5-7 June 2024)

CALL FOR PAPERS

Abstract: This exploratory workshop aims to delve into the financial dimensions of transnational aid, tracing its evolution from the emergence of modern humanitarianism in the mid-19th century to the present day. As a "laboratory for humanitarianism", the Middle East provides an optimal setting for such an enquiry. Hosted in Beirut, the event will bring together researchers from a wide range of disciplines as well as practitioners from the humanitarian and development sectors. It will examine the financial resources of aid, including their allocation, management and circulation, examining practices, discourses and strategies, while also considering long-term reflections. The objective is to analyse the processes of normalisation, exploring their effects and how they are contested, criticized or challenged. This analysis will span various scales and draw on a diverse array of actors, encompassing international and local NGOs, sectarian and faith-based organisations, among others. Issues such as fund-raising, salaries, overheads and the appropriation of aid will be addressed in relation to the dynamics between the aid sector and capitalism. Participants will be encouraged to reflect on ethical, economic and political challenges, and in particular on the role of the financial mechanisms of aid in relation to North/South dynamics.

Researchers specialising in the field of international solidarity and local forms of charity encounter significant challenges concerning the financial dimension of international aid. Common challenges include opaque and incomplete information sources, lack of research on the subject, and the prerequisites for advanced technical skills. On the other hand, professionals in humanitarian and development sectors often lack the necessary tools to grasp the socio-political dimensions of fund management and deployment, rooted in a longstanding history. What resources, management strategies, challenges, and inquiries may emerge from the financial operations of these sectors, both historically and in present-day practices? The Middle East, often described as a "laboratory of humanitarianism" (Watenpaugh 2015; Rodogno 2022) and remaining the primary home for refugees and displaced persons globally, offers a relevant vantage point to consider the various contemporary expressions and transformations of humanitarian efforts. This exploratory workshop will address the financial dimensions of aid, their management and circulation, examining practices, discourses, and strategies implemented since the emergence of modern humanitarianism around the 1860 crisis in Lebanon to recent upheavals such as the war in Syria. The analysis will be conducted on multiple scales, with a focus on long-term reflections and the interplay between the local and the global.

Understanding the Resources of Humanitarianism and Development

One key aspect concerns fundraising. Strategies and techniques employed, such as the sale of items, collections at places of worship, media campaigns, social events, lobbying, and calls for projects, raise questions about their impact on resource utilisation. How have these practices evolved over time, and what reflections have they prompted? What proportion of the budget is allocated to communication and marketing activities? If professionalisation is here long-established, it nevertheless alternates with

various forms of volunteering, from the religious personnel of faith-based NGOs to businesspersons offering their expertise.

Secondly, where do these resources come from? Research has predominantly focused on the operations of larger NGOs with major funders and, consequently, their implications in terms of influence and power asymmetries (Smillie, Minear 2004; Elbers, Bas 2011). We still need to understand better how local organisations sometimes manage to negotiate their priorities with regard to donor agendas (Bourmaud 2020). Moreover, research should dedicate more space to exploring other types of donors, individual donations, bequests or corporate foundations, which smaller NGOs tend to favour, as well as the revenue generated by aid organisations themselves, sometimes embedded in a broader political economy program. The increasing role of diasporas in the circulation of philanthropic financial flows also merits special attention.

This leads to the question of the relationship between humanitarianism and capitalism. A historical perspective will enhance our understanding of transformations influenced by the emergence of philanthropy at the turn of the 20th century, rooted in the capitalist ethics of giving, and changes induced later on by the neoliberal turn (Zunz 2012; Labib, Turiano 2024). To what extent can vulnerabilities be integrated in a market-led system of “commodification of vulnerabilities” (Ruiz de Elivra, Saeidnia 2020)? This analysis involves, for example, scrutinizing the taxation of donations and the various ways aid is reciprocated through the export of goods and services (Barnett 2011; Xavier de Montclos 2012). On another level, the aim is to improve our understanding of the sector's relationship with the states in which it operates, particularly when it becomes a component of public resources, which often elude national democratic processes.

Finally, how do we measure the funds allocated to humanitarianism and development on different scales? What tools are available for such enquiry? Has the proliferation of NGOs and the competitive investment in the development field genuinely led to a reduction in available funds? To what extent can the employment share in this sector serve as a proxy?

Management of Funds: Norms, Surpassings, Experiments

The administration of funds within humanitarian and development contexts raises questions related to costs, efficiency, managerial influences, and, more broadly, their modus operandi. While the demand for transparency has intensified since the 1900s-1920s, management methods have evolved since the mid-20th century towards a certain standardisation, giving rise to strategies aimed at adapting, surpassing, or even bypassing rules sometimes deemed inadequate.

A major challenge revolves around overheads, particularly the portion of fundraising allocated to overhead expenses. Ideally, organisations aim to achieve a balance between financial sustainability imperatives and the need to allocate sufficient resources to fulfil their aid missions. However, studies highlight a "labyrinthine proliferation" of aid and development, extending through a multiscale administration and an extensive network of intermediaries (Berthier, Harling, Simon 2017). Hence, a critical evaluation of this phenomenon of aid dissemination and its trickle-down effects becomes essential.

From the 1970s-1980s onwards, project-based funding gained popularity among donors, aiming to ensure better efficiency and effectiveness in interventions through clearly defined objectives, better planning, and facilitated result evaluation (*International Aid Actors* 2019). However, this approach can lead to some rigidity, with the standardisation of projects, simultaneously increasing the time and resources devoted to administration, monitoring and evaluation. These aspects also raise questions about the sustainability of actions when local partners might be left behind, as they often lack the same technical expertise and struggle to conform to the standardised language and practices of international donors. In this regard, the commitment by humanitarian donors and aid organisations at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016 to localise aid is still proving hard to achieve.

Meanwhile, various operational modes emerge, indicating a willingness to rethink practices, such as public/private partnerships, notably within the World Food Programme (WFP), or decentralized cooperation, establishing partnerships between geographically distant regions.

These concerns reflect the ethical and practical debate between volunteerism and employment, present since the early days of humanitarianism: how to reconcile vocation and professionalisation, voluntary work and attractiveness, salary equity without undermining public services? While the professionalisation of humanitarianism and the diversification of international aid professions have

intensified since the 1990s, these developments have, in reality, unfolded gradually and in stages since the mid-20th century (Brunel 2001). Some actors, particularly among religious structures, have long emphasized their ability to reduce costs by leveraging existing religious structures and predominantly volunteer labour. This workshop will also explore the engagement of refugees and displaced persons through recruitment within NGOs, sometimes in the form of paid volunteering; the lack of research on the subject further confirms its invisibility (Drif 2018; Di Cecco, Drif, Aubry 2019).

North/South relations? The Middle East on a Global Scale

Studying financial flows provides a tangible approach to deciphering the relationships between international donors and local partners. To what extent are the North/South dynamics specific to the sector overcome, maintained, or reinforced? How does the desire to give a greater role to national and local players translate - or not - in these evolving local contexts?

We aim to examine the more or less significant discrepancies between the guidelines laid down by donors and the realities or priorities on the ground, which are characterised by changing and complex dynamics. At the interface, the role of "local development brokers" is to represent the needs of communities to funding institutions, but further in-depth study is needed (De Sardan, Bierschenk 1993). While necessary, the bureaucratic procedures and transparency standards imposed on these various partners and intermediaries are sometimes perceived as heavy and costly. How are they implemented, and to what extent do they exclude smaller but deeply rooted structures, that are also closer to local needs and capacities (Berthier, Harling, Simon 2017)? From this point of view, this workshop could contribute to the reflections prompted by post-colonial studies (Aloudat, Khan 2022). In addition, a so-called community-based or inclusive approach has been advocated for some years, including by some major donors. Influenced by North American philanthropy, could it also find roots in older practices, particularly within faith-based humanitarianism? (Verdeil 2015).

Islamic finance and Muslim NGOs draw precisely from firmly rooted philanthropic traditions, such as the waqf system and innovations of the post-reformation Ottoman Empire. Sometimes reluctant to integrate humanitarian concepts perceived as Western (Faure 2021), they have experienced significant growth in recent years. The Syrian crisis has been a catalyst, with substantial investment from Arab donors and Gulf States (Ababsa 2017). These relatively new or recently visible actors in the humanitarian field operate on the margins of UN organisations and traditional donors, making it difficult to measure their impact. What modalities do these partially different systems introduce for fundraising, beneficiary selection, and distribution practices? Do they bring forth other norms? Often suspected of proselytism or Islamic intrusion, these actors reactivate issues related to the intertwining of humanitarian, political and religious spheres that are characteristic of faith-based NGOs.

Middle Eastern countries are compensated by international aid in exchange for managing the flow of exiles. To what extent does this role of subcontractors to Europe and North America become a source of income, and how the aid benefits the exiles themselves? (Fawaz, Harb 1993). Turkey provides a relevant area for analysis as the state aspires to take full responsibility for the issue of Syrian refugees, excluding the presence or control of international organisations such as the UNHCR (Danis 2006).

Evaluations, Controls and Effectiveness

While evaluation and monitoring practices in the humanitarian and development sectors are now systematised, it is crucial to recognise their historical roots, which can be traced back to the last 19th century (Labib 2020). This historical context sets the stage for understanding their evolution over time. How has the phenomenon of bureaucratisation influenced these processes? And how is efficacy measured?

Despite the push for transparency, some opacity remains when it comes to the various costs of humanitarian practices – for instance, the ongoing evaluation of the AFD's six programs following the Beirut port explosion could serve as a case study. Moreover, monitoring, evaluation, and transparency standards usually operate unilaterally: could they not risk reinforcing asymmetrical relationships between donors, partners, and beneficiaries? These processes can lead to additional expenses as well as time commitments, creating a complex engineering of aid, development, and humanitarian action. These complexities can sometimes be overlooked, prompting questions about their effectiveness and real impact.

Aid control mechanisms aim to ensure better distribution and avoid duplication, but they can sometimes lead to an intrusion into the private lives of beneficiaries (Issa 2019). Finally, a major concern revolves around the misappropriation and instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid, as seen in Syria, for instance, where conditions imposed by the regime on NGOs mean that a significant part of the aid goes to the government¹.

PARTICIPATION

Proposals should fit into this general framework. This field of study is relatively underexplored by research, especially in its historical dimension. This exploratory workshop aims to engage various approaches from the humanities and social sciences, as well as academic knowledge and practical insights. Papers focusing on a case study, a corpus of sources, feedback from the field, technical tools, and methodologies are particularly welcome. They may also involve a review of the current state of the art or an account of collective thinking.

Applicants are invited to submit an abstract no more than 500 words long and a short bio (title, institutional affiliation, major publications) in either French or English by 2 April 2024 to: m.levant@ifpoorient.org.

The workshop, scheduled at Ifpo in Beirut, will be conducted in both English and French, with the outcomes culminating in a publication. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered within the limits of the budget.

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¹ See the press articles by economist Karam Shaar (Weelington) and « Le régime syrien a criminalisé toute action humanitaire ».

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