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HOW SHOULD WE DEFINE AND PRIORITISE HUMANITARIAN NEED?

AN ETHICS-BASED PERSPECTIVE FOR IMPACT INITIATIVES

This NCHS paper uses ethical thinking to propose a new approach to humanitarian need. It offers a perspective on how humanitarians might simplify and prioritise need at a critical time of changing emergency across the globe.

AUTHOR

Dr. Hugo Slim
Las Casas Institute for Social Justice, Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford

INTRODUCTION

This paper uses ethical thinking to propose a new approach to humanitarian need. It offers a personal opinion on how humanitarians might simplify and prioritise need at a critical time of changing emergency across the globe. The ideas and recommendations presented are intended as an independent academic contribution to policy discussions about need in the humanitarian sector that are urgently required today as climate emergency intensifies and the risk of global war haunts contemporary geopolitics.

The task and the text

The task was something of a sprint in one of the wettest summer months on record in UK. Its purpose was to bring a fresh eye to humanitarian need, which is an extremely challenging task. I doubt I have succeeded overall, and feel sure that many people will find significant difficulties with how I propose that we can better simplify and prioritise humanitarian aid. However, I hope what follows will start a wider discussion and enable humanitarians to find ways to define and prioritise needs more clearly in good conscience.

The opinion is organised in five parts:

- Part One explains why we need to reflect urgently on how we define need.
- Part Two flags certain moral tensions that always arise around meeting needs.
- Part Three outlines the core requirements in defining a need.
- Part Four distinguishes certain basic needs as humanitarian needs.
- The Annex summarises six theories of need used in current humanitarian policy.

The paper does not examine the current UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) led approach to humanitarian needs and prioritisation. I lack the knowledge and expertise to do so. Instead, I try to take a fresh ethical view on how international humanitarians might think anew about need and prioritisation if, like me, they were offered a blank screen on which to do so.

I am very aware that I have written this paper in Oxford and not in Somalia or Ukraine, and am giving my opinion from a place where I can easily meet my basic needs. Knowing this, I have tried to write with compassion for those who are living very different lives, but still I may sound hard in some of the limits I set to humanitarian need.

1. WHY WE NEED A NEW APPROACH TO DEFINING NEED?

A new approach to the definition and prioritisation of humanitarian needs is strategically urgent for four main reasons.

- Compound crises of climate emergency, increasing poverty, war and the revival of deadly diseases will dramatically increase the number of vulnerable people around the world. Within the next ten years, the climate emergency in particular will tip the world into a constant succession of disasters that will affect billions of people, many more than the hundreds of millions crisis affected people today. This reason alone makes it imperative that humanitarians develop an approach to needs that is better suited to the 2020s and 2030s than the 2010s.

- There is growing suspicion that humanitarian bureaucracies have settled into certain organisational habits of prioritisation that do not reflect people's actual needs.[1] Instead, agency systems repeatedly promote priorities in their own mandates, and play into sets of need around their expertise and vested interests, much more than they express the felt needs and priorities of communities living through emergencies. In this way, most international agencies see needs as a mirror image of their own specialism, capacity and social values, just as the proverbial hammer always seeks and finds a nail. This runs the risk that humanitarian agencies are meeting their own organisational needs as much, or more, than people's actual needs. Many humanitarian institutions seem path-dependent on meeting a set of fixed needs to which they are designed to respond, and so deploy confirmation bias to find them. In short, humanitarian prioritisation may be thinking more about the needs of agencies than the needs of people.

- Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) humanitarians do not share a clear conceptual theory and framework of humanitarian need. Nor do they have an overall strategic purpose that specifies what their humanitarian system is trying to achieve. Instead, each agency has a collection of their own mandated objectives for improving the lives of particular categories of people, like children and refugees, or improving one quality of human life like health or food security. OECD states, as the main funders of IASC coordinated humanitarian aid, do not define humanitarian need collectively in the policy statements of their Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

- A similar lack of clarity exists among UN member states which annually renew UN humanitarian policy priorities in a sweeping General Assembly resolution on Strengthening the Coordination of Humanitarian and Disaster Relief. This resolution becomes more elaborate each year as it spells out an ever-expanding range of humanitarian needs. It says nothing of how these myriad needs and policies should be prioritised in practice but only that they should all be taken into account.

This all leaves a policy vacuum around the specific definition and prioritisation of need at the core of Western humanitarianism. This is covered over by an endlessly iterative and cumulative approach that recognises more and more different types of need. This Christmas tree approach to needs sees the UN General Assembly, IASC, donor governments and international organisations adding ever more baubles to an increasingly weighed down needs tree.

2. PERENNIAL POLICY TENSIONS IN DEFINING AND RESPONDING TO NEED

Administering international aid always carry tensions around questions of ambition, responsibility and agency. These are made more intense in situations of disaster and conflict when social norms and institutions are breaking down.

The Annex to this paper summarises the six different theories of need which are currently in play across the humanitarian sector: needs; goods; capabilities; rights; liberation, and resilience. Current humanitarian policy draws on all six theories in its approach to humanitarian need. Each theory takes a slightly different view on the questions of ambition, responsibility and agency.

How ambitious should we be?

The first tension is around objective. Is a humanitarian programme's ambition one of *satisficing* or *optimising* people's quality of life? Is it a feasible goal for aid and welfare to focus universally on needs all the way to the top of Maslow's pyramid and on every human good? Or should policy apply all its resources to the satisfaction of basic needs? The idea of need implies a sufficiency rather than totality of human experience, but a utopian tendency has been evident in humanitarian aid in the last 30 years. This may change fast in the global climate emergency if funds are reduced and survival becomes more pressing than flourishing.

The inevitable diversity of need across different groups in society routinely undercuts simple attempts at universal welfare. Variations in gender, class, assets, geography, ability, ethnic group and patterns of discrimination inevitably mean that aid and welfare must be tailored and tweaked to create a fair system. Even if humanitarian ambition is simply framed around satisficing not optimising, a diversity of people's experience and suffering requires intricate and expensive needs assessment and programming if differences in situation are to be fairly taken into account. Simple objectives still rely on nuanced targeting.

Who is responsible for meeting needs?

A fundamental tension of responsibility exists in the relative weight given to personal responsibility and state responsibility for meeting needs. How much is it my conative responsibility to stay healthy, educate myself and my family, create my own livelihood and meet my needs, and how much of this should be shared by the state or its proxies, like aid agencies?

This tension centres on a risk of disempowerment and dependency if people are tempted or forced to abdicate too much personal responsibility and effort to welfare institutions. Alternatively, there is the risk of entrenched needs if people are left to struggle impossibly alone in an unfair society devoid of welfare or aid.

A tension over public and private spheres of life is another manifestation of the responsibility question. This usually arises in objections to intrusion by the state or aid agency into personal matters. Why is the sex life of my family members any business of a humanitarian agency? Why should the government or UNICEF (UN International Children's Emergency Fund) be telling me which school my children should attend or what curriculum they should study? The public-private boundary of need is always contested, and one person's need for contraception or education is another person's moral preference not to have it.

There is also the tension between prioritising inside help or outside help to meet people's needs. How much responsibility can and should be given to local and mutual aid within a needy community, and how much to exogenous agencies intervening from outside it? This is an especially important question for two reasons. First, because significant injections of outsider aid can disrupt and undermine valuable informal systems of mutual aid. Secondly, outside systems can increasingly take control of inside problems and start defining needs and solutions in their own terms. This may lead to unjust domination by the outside helper.

What is the right balance between individual and collective need?

Humanitarian ideology is heavily invested in the idea of the unique human person. The value of our singular identity as a human being is universally recognised around the world today. However, individual need always operates in tension with the equally important idea of our plural fulfilment as families, groups, communities, societies, nations and species. This tension naturally produces difficult prioritising choices between financing individuals or systems. For example, funding therapuetic feeding for ten children or general rations and agricultural support for ten families.

The "personalism" of humanitarianism has always to find a balance between excessive individualism and excessive collectivism. It does so by constantly emphasising that a singular human being is precious but only ever finds true satisfaction and fulfilment as a person within a human community. We are valuable individuals and social animals. This means we have individual needs and social needs, and many of our individual needs are best met by social investments in families, schools, business associations, shared infrastructure and political institutions.

Who understands needs best?

There is frequently an epistemic tension around who has the optimal knowledge for defining and resolving needs. Needs are not easy to know. I may know that I am ill or poor and so express a need for better health or increased wealth, but I may not know exactly what is needed to make me healthier or wealthier. An old slogan from poverty policy has it that "people are the experts on their own condition".

This is partly true, but the person with needs is not always best placed to describe or understand their need in full, or to devise the best solution to their need. Nor is the outside expert. This makes it imperative for people and policy makers to work together and co-create an accurate description of need and a response to it. The better slogan is perhaps "nothing about me without me."

A tension between tangible and intangible need also arises when communities prioritise intangible needs like togetherness, belonging and hope by rebuilding a mosque or a church before a clinic. Welfare institutions find this difficult to programme, especially if what they have available to give are cash or a limited set of commodities. This is part of a wider tension between the perceived needs subjectively expressed by individuals and communities, and so-called actual needs measured and objectively defined by aid technicians working to a policy template.

Political priorities by donors can influence prioritisation and response to certain types or groups of need. What people need funding and what governments want to fund may differ. Political preferences in donor-driven aid can determine which geographies, groups and sectors are prioritised as the greatest needs. The last 20 years show new geographies and policies emerging. These have prioritised people living through wars fought by Western states in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine and the Sahel, although evidence suggests that this is not always at the expense of other disasters. Changing policy preferences have clearly prioritised women and girls, displaced people, and LGBTQI people.[2] New services have been formally recognised and prioritised as humanitarian needs, like education, mental health and sexual violence programming.[3]

Finally, a society may pose an ethical conundrum to humanitarians by favouring their need for political freedom over life itself. In many political struggles, people will deliberately endure suffering and sacrifice their lives because they prioritise political freedom more than life. This reversal of needs confounds humanitarian ideology, and has been recently expressed in Ukraine and Myanmar where people have rejected humanitarian aid in certain forms. In these situations, human life becomes the means not the end of human need, and it is a people's liberty that must be satisfied above all else.

3. WHAT IS A NEED?

Like most little words, need is tricky: seemingly simple and intuitive, but laden with quite complicated implications. We know that if we need something then it is essential and necessary because other things depend on it. For example, I need x to bring about y. If we have what we need, then we say that we have enough. It is sufficient and we are satisfied. A need, therefore, has these characteristics of being necessary or essential because it enables something important. When a need is met or fulfilled, it brings about a quality of satisfaction, sufficiency or completion.

However, understanding this does not automatically tell us which needs are important. This is especially true when we often use the word informally in ways that obscure its core meaning. Nor does this definition tell us how one need relates to another. This open-endedness in a simple definition presents humanitarians with significant challenges around the language, moral range, levels and prioritisation of need.

Language and meaning

Different usage of the word "need" is the first challenge in thinking about what constitutes a specifically *humanitarian need* because we use the word so freely in ordinary conversation. Pinning down a humanitarian usage is helped by distinguishing need from its linguistic cousins: want; desire, and preference. Their meanings differ but sometimes overlap with need. If I want, prefer or desire something, I do not always need it in the strict sense but may seek it for all sorts of reasons to do with fun, ease, kudos, fashion or greed. We often use need in these contexts, and it is not technically wrong if I need something to satisfy a desire. This suggests there are weak and strong uses of the word.

American philosopher, Harry Frankfurt, describes how someone may need a dictionary to finish a crossword puzzle.[4] They may literally need it to know how to spell a word correctly, but this is a weak use of the word because the reason they need a dictionary is not seriously important. Frankfurt reminds us that *the purpose for which we need something determines the significance of a need* and whether it is "morally superior" to a want, desire or preference. Need takes on its strong moral meaning when the reason we need something is because it is truly indispensable not to a task that gives us pleasure or improvement, but to a process that keeps us alive. What we need then becomes existentially necessary. In this stronger meaning of the word, need refers to "things one cannot do without" and gets its particular moral power from *a direct link to harm*. The crossword puzzler may be annoyed and fail in their last two clues because they do not have a dictionary, but they will not be seriously harmed by this.

Linkage to harm is, therefore, critical to humanitarian usage of need because humanitarians define their purpose as: *to protect life and health, and ensure respect for the human being*. When humanitarians use the word, we can suppose they mean that someone, or some group of people, will be significantly worse off if they do not get what they need. They will be harmed. David Wiggins suggests that the special force of a moral claim of serious need is that it relates to a person's *vital interest*.[5] The word vital is, of course, derived from the Latin *vita* meaning life. Such vital interests are, therefore, expressed as *basic needs* or *essential needs*. If not met, serious harm, inhuman treatment or death will follow. This stronger meaning of need sounds more like a humanitarian use of the word.

Life-saving not life-making

This strong moral usage gives important parameters to the meaning of need for humanitarians because it defines a need as something absolutely necessary and indispensable to avoid a life-threatening harm. Defining need as something necessary and essential to life sits well within humanitarian aid's core purpose of life-saving. But, of course, it leaves out a much bigger realm of *life-making needs* – those things we need to create a happy and prosperous life in which we thrive and flourish across a wide range of human goods that may be beneficial rather than essential.

These wider life-making needs pose a challenge of moral range in our definition of humanitarian needs. How far humanitarian responsibility should extend beyond life-saving into life-making continues to puzzle and preoccupy humanitarians. It turns on the core policy question of whether humanitarian aid is a *satisficing project*, which aims to satisfy basic human needs and protect people from harm, or an *optimising project* which aims to produce a better world for them in which they can then thrive across the whole range of a good human life.[6]

In my view, humanitarian ambition has advanced too far up the life-making route in recent years. This optimising move stems, perhaps, from a happy coincidence of widely shared ethical intentions and lots of money. Its broad approach is especially manifest in a new study to explore wellbeing as a strategic objective for the sector.[7] But I share David Braybrooke's cautionary view that it is wise to hold firm to a life-saving definition of needs in international ethics. He urges that "the concept of need should not be expanded so far as to risk making an approach to meeting needs indistinguishable from an approach achieving all good things."[8]

This life-saving limitation on humanitarian need strikes me as reasonable and important for humanitarians if their project is to remain explicit in its moral concern for periods of emergency in people's lives, and so play a distinct life-saving role in the business of government and community development. It also seems justified at a time when basic needs may rise significantly in the climate emergency, and when traditional donor governments are facing calls on their emergency budgets from their own citizens facing climate-related disasters at home.

The art of limited humanitarian aid, as always, will be to ensure that life-saving is done in such a way that it also supports people's independent life-making. This is well understood and applied in Disaster Risk Reduction's (DRR) commitment to resilience in which people are well protected from risks to life and so in a position to prioritise life-making as a result.

How to meet needs

Even if we focus only on life-saving needs, we soon discover different layers of need in people's lives. These are usefully distinguished as *immediate needs* and *system needs*. Someone who is hungry and thirsty needs food and water now. But their needs are usually not simply for calories and fluids. They also need resilient water infrastructure and fair food systems to produce clean water and good food. If they are isolated and alone, they need to be moved closer to people who love them. Family tracing, permissions, documentation and transport form the wider web of system needs around a simple and immediate social need.

This layering of need means that meeting basic needs typically requires elaborate programming that locates much of the content of a person's need in collective processes around them not the simple biology within them. A family's need is not just for enough clean water but for the many different things – reservoirs, filters, pipes, taps and pumps - that combine to produce it. The need for water is obvious and complicated at the same time. Because of this, the phrase "basic needs" can be misleading. The word "basic" denotes that the needs are basic and fundamental to human life, and not that they are basically simple to satisfy. Needs are existentially basic but meeting them is often operationally elaborate.

Choosing between needs

It is an inevitable fact that we cannot meet every need in this world. This means we have to select and choose which needs to meet. This sometimes requires us to prioritise one need over another. For example, health over education, or family income over psycho-social counselling. It may also involve prioritising one group of people over another. For example, Ukrainians over Indonesians, cholera patients over the chronically unwell, or girls over men. We may need to choose between needs near and far, cheaper and more expensive needs, or the easy to help and the difficult to help. In the world as it is, we cannot escape these choices around needs. In the global climate emergency, we can expect these choices to become more pressing.

The different aspects of need described above produce three important questions that must be answered in any attempt to produce a practical way of defining and prioritising humanitarian needs.

- What is a distinctly humanitarian need?
- How wide is the range of humanitarian need?
- How shall we prioritise between different needs and different people in need?

The next section suggests possible answers to these questions by offering a simpler framework for humanitarian need and reasonable criteria for prioritisation in the face of overwhelming and competing needs.

4. THE FUTURE OF NEED

Humanitarians must expect the climate emergency to create an unprecedented scale of need in the 2020s and 2030s. This may even emerge in a constant wave of *massive need* - huge numbers of people facing recurrent disasters of unprecedented intensity all around the world, and the inevitable impoverishment, mobility and poor health that will come with this.[9] The risk of suffering and death from climate related hazards will exponentially increase if adaptation fails in densely populated parts of the world.

For hundreds of millions of people, the climate emergency will be relatively *world-ending*. Their home areas will be rendered uninhabitable, their traditional livelihoods defunct and their way of life dramatically changed, and they will have to start their life again somewhere else. These people do not only live in traditional humanitarian aid areas like Africa's Sahel, vulnerable parts of Asia and Latin America but in many other regions too, including North America. Competition over resources for survival, adaptation, relocation and restarting will be universal and severe. I doubt that humanitarians will be able to be as ambitious in their concerns and as nuanced in their social targeting as they aspire to be today, unless AI proves a wonderful game changer in the administration and delivery of aid.

What is the range of humanitarian need: Life-saving and life-keeping

The scale and extent of climate emergency means that life-saving will become a pressing priority in many parts of the world.

Life-making for many will be less focused on flourishing and more concerned with starting again and achieving meaningful social integration into a new place or a changed place, and successful adaptation to a changed climate. Simply *staying alive* will become a priority for more people than it is today in a process closer to *life-keeping* than life-making. Just as it does for the world's poor today, life-keeping will involve a constant concern for basic needs, adaptation and resilience with less money or time for more elaborate life-making. Just keeping a life intact at a basic survival level will be most people's priority in the face of recurring hazards and difficult climate adaptations. Extensive life-making will be beyond the reach of many people with whom humanitarians are working.

Faced with this emerging increase in basic human need, it seems imperative and wise to agree a new framework for humanitarian needs that is guided by simplicity of purpose around people's basic needs, and morally justifiable reasons for prioritisation. Such a framework must keep the range of humanitarian need *within the grip of necessity* and focused firmly on people's *vital interests*.

This parameter produces just four types of humanitarian need, which are summarised in Box 1. These capture both the purpose of the principle of humanity and the element of immediate existential necessity in the international concept of humanitarian need. They also encapsulate the dozens of needs and clusters with which humanitarians are concerned and organises them into a single basic framework, which is relatively simple to use as a tool to strategise, plan, monitor and report. More fundamentally, if these four needs are being met well enough, they combine to give people and communities *respect and resilience* which function as the two meta-objectives of satisfying humanitarian needs.

Box 1 - Four Types of Humanitarian Need

The following four needs draw on a combination of the six theories of need in the Annex, most notably basic needs theory, capabilities and human goods.

HEALTH NEED

This puts a necessarily urgent focus on our **bodily needs**. Meeting bodily needs protects life and health. Good health is also **a basic pre-condition** for people being capable to make the cognitive and conative effort to improve their wider conditions and meet their needs.

Health makes sufficient safety, food, clean water, shelter, sanitation, healthcare and burial of the dead essential humanitarian needs. In the climate emergency, keeping cool, staying dry, and avoiding fire and smoke also achieve the status of basic health needs. Mental health only becomes a humanitarian need in situations where people's distress, sadness, uncertainty and anger is not sufficiently resolved by community-led caring, or the healing that comes from their own agency in their wider socio-economic recovery.

SOCIAL NEED

A focus on social need is necessary for reasons of health and capability. It takes two basic forms: the **sociality** or **conviviality** of family, friendship and community, and the formal **associational life** that produces cultural, economic and political capability in groupings and businesses of all kinds. Social needs are met physically and virtually today for billions of people.

Respect is a fundamental social need that is met by the respect of others and our own self-respect through social and associational life. The humanitarian duty of *respect for the human person* requires **humane treatment** in all situations, especially around gender, age and ability. Respect is also needed in the inter-personal courtesy with which aid practices should be carried out.

Box 1 - Continued

SURIVIVAL CAPABILITY

Without certain basic capabilities we cannot save our lives or stay alive. **Cognitive capabilities** are vital as knowledge and skills to participate and cooperate effectively, earn a living and mitigate the risks around us. Numeracy and literacy, indigenous knowledge, crafts, skills are all necessary to support us economically. A faith or wisdom tradition is vital to encourage and guide us.

Threats to life from climate emergency, war and disease also make it essential to have the **capability to anticipate, reduce and adapt** to hazards and risks. Ability to access and interpret climate services is a basic need in the climate emergency. Capability to receive, understand and co-generate early warning, and readiness to take preventive and anticipatory action is life-saving. So too is the ability to adapt to changing climate with new ways of building, growing crops, managing disease, running businesses, staying cool, warm and dry, and avoiding fire and smog.

SYSTEMS NEED

Satisfying people's immediate basic needs for health, social life and capability depends on meeting people's deeper system needs. These are needs we all share in foundational systems that produce the necessary goods on which life depends. Humanitarian system needs are best distinguished between economic systems, infrastructure and ecosystem. Every human life has vital interests in each of these systems to meet their basic health and social need.

Access to **economic systems** (markets, supply chains), **infrastructure** (energy, health, water, transport, communications, education) is vital to achieving a subsistence livelihood. Every human being also depends on **ecosystems**. This makes nature important to human life and survival. It also means that meeting nature's needs becomes a humanitarian priority. All life should matter in humanitarian action. **Legal systems** can be necessary to enable people to meet their needs.

If these four needs are well enough met they enable people to stay alive and secure **respect and resilience** in their lives.

How do we prioritise distinct humanitarian needs?

In the international arena, a humanitarian need finds its particular threshold in a large life-threatening emergency that gains national and international political significance. It assumes the idea of a massive life or death crisis in which there is a serious risk to life itself, and not simply the problem of a poor quality of life. The principle of humanity affirms that a distinctly humanitarian moral concern is a limited one: *to protect life and health, and ensure respect for the human person*. UN and Red Cross/Red Crescent law makes it plain that humanitarian aid specifically concerns emergency response to extreme situations of harm arising from disasters and war. In international policy, therefore, humanitarian need and humanitarian aid refer to a life or death emergency of significant scale.

This means that it is not a humanitarian crisis if I am ill with the flu at home in Oxford with a doctor near at hand, or a humanitarian crisis of respect for my person if someone rudely pushes past me in a rush for a seat on the train. Nor is it a distinctly humanitarian crisis if I am living a very poor quality of life in an informal urban settlement in Iraq that was originally formed by Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) fleeing for their lives some 20 years ago. Such a situation may involve terrible conditions of poverty but not necessarily of emergency or disaster. Because my life is ultimately "war affected" does not mean that I am experiencing a humanitarian crisis now. Instead, I am living in the shadow of a war and with its long-term effects, but without its life-threatening emergency. I may be poor and would benefit greatly from a better job or more welfare support, but I do not have distinctly humanitarian needs. My life might be one of chronic poverty but not life-saving emergency.

If humanitarian aid is to have any distinct meaning in international and national policy that sets its moral purpose apart from general care, compassion, respect, welfare, wellbeing and poverty relief then it must find it in *disastrous* and *life-threatening* needs where an *overwhelming* number of people are already *gravely harmed* or face the imminent threat of serious harm if *urgent* action is not taken.[10] Distinctly humanitarian needs are *basic needs*. They are needs that determine life-saving and life-keeping, and which arise in a large scale life and death context. As such, humanitarian needs are more accurately described as widespread emergency needs.

My words in italics set the threshold for humanitarian needs rather than poverty needs. Humanitarian needs are disastrous, life-threatening, overwhelming and urgent. In other words, distinctly humanitarian needs must be very big and very bad, and they must constitute a life and death emergency of national and international concern. Humanitarians should operate on the simple life-saving mantra *if necessary*, and not the more life-making phrase *if beneficial*. Many things are beneficial to human life. Only basic needs are necessary.

Unless we recognise such extraordinary needs, it makes no sense to have a humanitarian sector or humanitarian aid. Both could be abolished. International aid and all aid institutions could focus entirely on poverty as the single most important dimension of human suffering at all times and in all places, which simply gets worse in emergencies but still needs to be addressed as poverty. Humanitarian workers would simply become poverty workers operating in an emergency. There would be no point in humanitarian terminology. This is an entirely reasonable policy option that would resolve the humanitarian-development dualism that is constantly at play in Western aid and its policy, practice and institutions.

5. A WAY FORWARD

This paper has laid out an argument for how a simpler framework of humanitarian need could be developed for the future of climate emergency which presses upon us. In particular, it suggests three steps which could shape a new framework for humanitarian needs that is more specific and morally robust than the current approach.

- It recognises life-saving and life-keeping necessity as the *threshold* of humanitarian need. It defines humanitarian needs as basic needs.

- It marks out these basic needs for urgent life-saving and life-keeping as the *parameter* of humanitarian need, and so distinguishes it from wider poverty alleviation, life-making, flourishing or wellbeing. It defines humanitarian aid as a satisficing project not an optimising one.

- It settles on four main types of basic need which should be the main focus of humanitarian policy and emergency action. Meeting these four needs would be the best way for people to save their lives and be respected and resilient.

Taken together, this framework offers humanitarians a clear way to conceive and update the definition of humanitarian need and a simpler dashboard to set humanitarian outcomes and monitor humanitarian assessment, budgeting, planning and success.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

IMPACT Shaping practices Influencing policies Impacting lives

REACH PANDA | AGORA

ANNEX: SIX DIFFERENT THEORIES USED BY HUMANITARIANS TODAY

Different ways of thinking about the proper dignity, sufficiency and flourishing of a human life continue to preoccupy moral and political philosophers, economists and social scientists. Today's discussions of global justice, modern welfare policy and development studies aim to define and achieve a good quality of life for everyone. Six of their particular ideas have become important to humanitarians: needs; capabilities; rights; liberation; goods, and resilience. Only the first framework is centred specifically on the concept of need itself, but all theories are in play to some degree in current humanitarian policies that talk about people's needs and how best to meet them.

None of these six theories originated within humanitarian ideology which, apart from the admirable detail of the Sphere Standards, has been intellectually vague about what it means by a specifically humanitarian need. However, each theory has crossed over to inform and influence humanitarianism so that current humanitarian policy is a mosaic of all six approaches.

1. Needs

The most widely known theory of needs is Abraham Maslow's idea that we are all motivated to fulfil a hierarchy of needs in our lifetime.[11] This hierarchy forms a pyramid with basic needs for physiological survival, safety, love, belonging and esteem as the foundation of a satisfied life. This theory then recognises a progression of needs. Once we are secure in satisfying our basic needs, we are ready and able to focus on our higher needs and so clamber up the pyramid. As Maslow puts it: "the most basic consequence of the satiation of any need is that this need is submerged and a new higher need emerges." This whole process of meeting needs gives meaning to our lives.

Our higher needs at the top of the pyramid are more aesthetic, like our needs for art, music and poetry, or more intellectual in our fascination and gratification in scientific discovery and engineering of various kinds. But, these higher needs also have important survival value beyond enjoyment alone. They make life easier and often more comfortable and rewarding in various ways. When our higher needs are satisfied alongside our basic needs, Maslow observes (like many gurus and philosophers before him) that we can achieve a measure of self-actualisation and moments of extraordinary flow in which we experience peak human fulfilment. Briefly, at the summit of the pyramid, humans may touch heaven.

The idea that there are *pre-conditions* for meeting our basic needs is central to Maslow and everyone after him. Meeting our needs is not a given in life. Satisfaction in life depends on knowledge, skill, effort and social support. For Maslow, this makes two types of pre-condition. *Cognitive attributes*, like curiosity, learning, knowing and understanding, help us to operate in the world and so meet our basic needs effectively. *Conative attributes* are the energy, willpower and effort that we each bring to meeting our needs, and which determine our ability to strive and struggle for our needs. Without these deep needs for cognitive and conative abilities, all our other needs will remain unmet.

Maslow's idea of basic needs has been adapted to become central in recent models of human needs in global justice and sustainable development. Len Doyal and Ian Gough produced an influential "Theory of Human Needs" which aims to universalise needs in a way that relates to all people.[12] Their universal goal is for all people to meet their needs sufficiently so that they enjoy "minimally impaired social participation" within their society.

This universal goal depends on two categories of basic needs being met: physical health and autonomy of agency. It counts 11 universal characteristics of needs satisfiers that include things like: adequate food, water and housing; non-hazardous environments; basic education; significant primary relationships, and security in childhood. Like Maslow, this model also includes pre-conditions for needs being met. In this case, they are "societal pre-conditions for needs satisfaction and optimisation", like reproduction, production, cultural transmission, political authority and freedoms.

Needs theory is considered to be especially suited to welfare policy and governance for three main reasons.

- Needs are clearly distinguishable from wants, desires and preferences, and the many "false needs" created by capitalist over-consumption. In contrast to these, needs imply necessity and survival and point to things that are essential to human life. When needs go unmet, we suffer. When our needs are met, we survive and thrive.

- Needs can be relatively easily spelt out and listed as concrete and actionable goals. They can then be counted in some way with indicators measuring deficiency or sufficiency, like hunger or food security, illness or health, danger or safety.

- As biological and social animals, we recognise our essential needs intuitively. When they are unmet, we experience needs in ourselves and others as something especially vivid and pressing in direct feelings like danger, thirst, hunger or isolation.

The felt and quantitative character of needs probably explains why needs theory tends to dominate humanitarian policy and public discussion of suffering.

2. Goods

Identifying a set of good things which constitute the individual good life is an ancient and influential approach for defining a sufficient quality of life. This draws on the wisdom traditions of Confucian China, West Asia and the Greek classical ethics of Aristotle, which was widely taken-up by Catholic, Islamic and liberal social ethics.

Long before other approaches, this tradition also sought out a boiled down version of basic goods or necessary goods which can be universally applied to achieve sufficient quality in every human life. Inspired by the medieval Christian theologian, Thomas Aquinas, John Finnis identifies seven basic forms of good for a flourishing human life.[13] These are: life; knowledge; sociability and friendship; play; aesthetic experience, practical reasonableness, and religion. Similarly Aristotelian notions of the good are also deeply embedded in Nussbaum's approach to capabilities. John Rawls emphasises five primary goods that operate like pre-conditions to enable people to meet their needs.[14] These focus on liberty, freedom of movement, sufficient wealth, social worth and access to political office.

Individual goods are scaled-up to a collective level in broader governmental notions of the common good and public goods. Economists favour public goods because they facilitate utilitarian thinking in public policy (the greatest good for the greatest number) and so define key infrastructure and services as public goods, like: energy and water; money and markets; government and the rule of law; social protection; clean air, health and education systems. Public goods can then be treated as one-stop shops to enable individual goods.

3. Capabilities

Maslow's idea of pre-conditions and the Aristotelean tradition inform the third big idea about achieving a sufficiently good human life proposed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.[15] This theory thinks it better to structure public policy and investment for fair human fulfilment around human capabilities not human needs. Sen finds a needs approach to human life inadequate for three main reasons.

- Needs always end up being framed in terms of commodities – things people need to fill up a deficit of some kind. This skews aid policy and practice towards bringing things to people.

- Needs are too passive a framework which undervalues the dynamism of human beings. Needs imply that it is people who are lacking and must be filled up somehow to have their needs met. In fact, people are highly active but tend to face obstacles. Taking away obstacles is a better way to meet needs.

- Needs thinking is too materialistic and technical. It misses out wider political understandings of what makes people suffer. Needs speak too much about things and not enough about political freedom and governance.

The capabilities approach starts by asking "what each person is able to do and to be" in a particular situation and then, if necessary, aims to empower them to do more and be more. It takes the perspective of freedom, not needs, and focuses on a person's agency, not what they lack.

A capabilities approach tries to increase people's abilities, their opportunities and their freedoms to choose and act so they can meet their needs themselves by changing their immediate conditions and bringing about wider political and social change. In this sense it is focused far more on the pre-conditions required for meeting needs.

Nussbaum's model recognises internal capabilities similar to Maslow's cognitive and conative pre-conditions and then settles on a list of ten central capabilities which must be enabled by political authority and public policy. These include: health; effective reasoning; emotional attachments and social affiliation; control over one's environment through political participation and property rights, and play and recreation. As such, they combine what economists might call human capital, social capital and political capital.

For Sen, "poverty is capability deprivation" and "capability is thus the substantive freedom to achieve the life you have reason to value." This focus on freedom as a person's essential requirement means the main role of public policy and institutions is to provide primary rights, public goods and services which people are then free to convert into the capability to achieve their chosen life objectives. It is a deliberate policy of empowerment that insists that what people need most are capabilities not things.

4. Rights

Human rights flow logically from capabilities and needs as another framework that is used to define quality and fairness in people's lives. Human rights politicise needs and capabilities into a schema of individual entitlements and government duties. Violations of rights create needs. The enactment of duties lead to the enjoyment of rights and the reduction of needs.

Here too, the idea of a core minimum has been suggested in Henry Shue's definition of certain basic rights.[16] Like basic needs, these prioritise life itself and the subsistence rights to food, water, health and shelter, plus civil and political rights to security and liberty. Within human rights, the idea of human dignity has become a core concept for what constitutes a good human life. A "life with dignity" is a strapline for a sufficiently good life that enjoys a basic range of human rights.

Human rights are used widely in development and humanitarian aid in a "rights-based approach" to poverty and suffering. Agencies with protection mandates, like the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) and UNICEF use all human rights instruments alongside their particular treaties and conventions on International Humanitarian Law (IHL), refugee law and children's rights, to affirm what constitutes a sufficiently dignified life for people. Most humanitarians ground their work in human rights and international law in the sector's Humanitarian Charter. The Sphere Standards spell out in precise detail what basic rights to health, water, sanitation, food security, shelter and protection look like in practice for people suffering in war and disaster.

In the climate emergency, human rights standards are also becoming the benchmark for a sufficient quality of life in the turmoil of climate emergency, and being used to describe disaster justice for vulnerable people as part of wider climate justice.[17] New resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly are using human rights to spell out the quality of life to which people affected by climate-related disasters are legally entitled. Vanuatu's test case at the International Court of Justice and a series of domestic cases around the world look set to consolidate a rights-based approach to climate suffering and survival.

5. Liberation

Marxist tradition frames the quality of people's lives in terms of their levels of oppression and liberation. The concept of liberation is similar to the individual and community empowerment implicit in liberalism's capabilities approach but is specifically anti-capitalist. The Marxist model is central to understanding needs for a range of leftist governments, NGOs and community-based organisations, as well as a significant strand of Christian social activism and new climate activism. Restructuring power in societies and in the humanitarian system in the interests of the most needy people is valued as an important way to limit disaster and war, and to ensure a fairer distribution of resources to meet people's needs.

Using Marxist structuralist analysis of the injustice of capitalist society, liberationists see structural change and revolutions in power and wealth distribution as liberating people into a better quality of life that produces more control over their lives and their natural resources, and more equality across society. Like Marx, Paolo Freire and others coming after him in community development, identify transformed personal consciousness and social solidarity as key pre-conditions for oppressed people, which then enable them to mobilise, design and produce just political and economic structures that will deliver good lives for all.

6. Resilience

The last idea belongs to the field of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) which frames people's needs within the process of the disaster cycle as prevention, preparedness, mitigation, adaptation, building back better and resilience. DRR sees resilience as an optimal state which gives people the best possible life in the face of the world's increasing hazards and risks, or the "good enough life" in the words of Avram Alpert.[18]

The resilience framework focuses more on vulnerability and risk than needs, and is rightly becoming a main focus for guaranteeing human survival in climate emergency. DRR spells out how the good life of an individual and community depends on reducing vulnerability and risk by meeting people's need to be prepared for disaster, adapted to resist it, and resilient enough to keep living well.

FOOTNOTES

[1] See, for example, the sense of mandate and operational "stuckness" felt by NGO CEOs in Max Baiden and Melanie Book (2023) Leadership Survey Report: What INGO Leaders Think About the Challenges they Face, and the Future of the Aid and Development Sector, at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/INGOs-the-Long-Humanitarian-Century-Leadership-Survey-Report-2022.pdf/.

[2] See for example, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) International Women and Girls Strategy 2023-30, London 2023, and German Federal Foreign Ministry, Guidelines for a Feminist Foreign Policy, Berlin 2023, which both represent firm consolidation of a 20-year policy trend.

[3] See for example Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) Education in Emergencies, July 2019, which puts education "at the heart of humanitarian action", and the landmark conference on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Crisis Situations hosted by the Government of the Netherlands in October 2019, which consolidated a growing trend for education and mental health as humanitarian priorities.

[4] Harry G. Frankfurt, "Necessity and Desire", in *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs*, ed. Gillian Brock, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham and Oxford, 1998, pp19-32.

[5] David Wiggins, "What is the Force of the Claim That One Needs Something", in *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs*, ed. Gillian Brock, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham and Oxford, 1998, pp33-56.

[6] This distinction comes from the twentieth century US political scientist, Herbert Simon, and has been widely taken up in public policy.

[7] Oliver Lough et al., Beyond Survival: Exploring Wellbeing in Humanitarian Action, Overseas Development Institute, 26 June 2023 at https://odi.org/en/publications/beyond-survival-exploring-wellbeing-in-humanitarian-action/.

[8] David Braybrooke, "The Concept of Needs, with a Heartwarming Offer of Aid to Utilitarians", in *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs*, ed. Gillian Brock Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham and Oxford, 1998, pp66.

[9] Hugo Slim, Humanitarian and the Climate Emergency: the Ethical, Practice and Cultural Challenges, Web Essay, GPPI Berlin, 28 June 2023, at https://gppi.net/2023/06/28/humanitarians-and-the-climate-emergency.

[10] Humanitarian had this meaning of general compassion and complete social reform in nineteenth century Europe and the USA. But its meaning has been changed in the late twentieth century, largely by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the UN, to have the much narrower meaning of impartial relief in disaster and war. Human Rights and welfare discourse has taken over the broader social and economic concerns of earlier humanitarian discourse, like universal schooling, health provision, labour rights, housing and prison reform.

[11] Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, Third Edition, Revised by Robert Frager et al. Addison Wesley Longman, New York, 1970, chapters 2, 3 and 5.

[12] Len Doyal and Ian Gough, A Theory of Human Needs, *Critical Social Policy*, Volume 4, Issue 10, 1984.

[13] John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1980, chapters 3 and 4.

[14] John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Belknap Harvard, Cambridge Mass, 2001.

[15] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, Belknap Harvard, Cambridge Mass, 2011.

[16] Henry Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, and revised edition.

[17] Anna Lukasiewicz and Claudia Baldwin eds, *Natural Hazards and Disaster Justice: Challenges for Australia and its Neighbours*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

[18] Avram Alpert, *The Good Enough Life*, Princeton University Life, Princeton, 2022.