Negotiating Humanitarian Security – between Norms and Practices: Editor's Introduction

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Most mainstream discourses on humanitarian security would not consider the community engagement of a team of anthropologists in three West African countries during the Ebola epidemic of 2014–16 as directly related to security – and their article in this special issue on 'Security and Protection' hardly touches on security as its own topic. Instead, it provides a detailed account of the need for a thorough understanding of social relationships when defining, and thus securing, humanitarian responses. Negotiations here take on their full meaning, far beyond simplistic visions of the notion of community. While the latter is introduced as a maze of at times diverging interests, negotiations are seen as a crucial step in securing consent. These appear all the more essential at a time when the responders to the Ebola epidemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo were confronted with multiple security incidents, including attacks on health centres and the deaths and kidnappings of health professionals.

These reflections may be at odds with how the professionalisation of security has given rise to a separate set of security concerns and actors, or, in other words, how the issue of humanitarian security has largely been addressed as an isolated and distinct issue. But what all the contributions to the issue demonstrate is that humanitarian security is not and cannot ever be tackled separately from broader humanitarian dynamics.

Another feature of many discourses on humanitarian security is that being a humanitarian worker has never been so complex and dangerous. Many humanitarian narratives are fuelled by the fears of organisations: they see their working space reduced under the joint pressure of states increasingly asserting their sovereignty and of more frequent security incidents due to direct targeting, all happening in the context of widespread erosion of international norms (Shaheen, 2016; Bouchet-Saulnier and Whittall, 2019; UN Security Council, 2019).

In recent years, several publications have attempted to analyse these discourses critically. In 2011, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) published a book on humanitarian negotiations (Magone *et al.*, 2011) in which the authors deconstructed 'declinism' while emphasising the intrinsically political dimension of aid, the responsibility of aid organisations to establish their work space and the crucial role of negotiations in the implementation of relief operations. Other analysts reached the same conclusions in a series of studies on humanitarian space (Collinson and Elhawary, 2012) and humanitarian negotiations, particularly in Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia (Jackson, 2014; Jackson and Giustozzi, 2012).

In 2014, Larissa Fast published *Aid in Danger* (Fast, 2014), a timely book reminding humanitarian organisations of their responsibility to work on internal vulnerabilities, such as individual behaviour or organisational lapses. Fast's main intention was to challenge what she dubbed 'humanitarian exceptionalism', the idea that aid workers should be protected at all times and in all places by virtue of the uniqueness of their function and moral standing. In the same year, arguably the apex of the heroisation of humanitarian workers, the UN launched the #HumanitarianHero campaign on 19 August to celebrate World Humanitarian Day (Neuman, 2017).

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MSF published a multi-author review of its experience in risk management in 2016 (Neuman and Weissman, 2016). In particular, the authors criticised humanitarian organisations' victim discourses – on the alleged growing threats to their work – and pointed out the weaknesses of the security-related statistics on which they relied. In the context of the bureaucratisation of the sector, they emphasised the political dimension of security management while introducing humanitarian action as a 'prudential occupation'. In so doing, they were calling for the restoration of the notion of 'practical wisdom' to risk management in humanitarian situations (Champy, 2018). The precursors to these studies included those of Mark Duffield, who in a seminal article denounced the 'bunkerisation' of NGOs (Duffield, 2010) and then, alongside Sarah Collinson and others, the 'paradoxes of presence' (Collinson et al., 2013).

However, the exchange of field practices remains limited and the academic and policy critique of security practices does not seem to have had the impact it warrants. It is largely to this gap in knowledge that this issue attempts to respond, by creating the conditions for a discussion between practitioners and researchers. Contributors to the current issue are researchers – practitioners stimulated by reflecting around their work – and practitioners turned researchers, with some articles being written by four hands. Most of the authors would consider humanitarian aid not as an exact science but an art, or at least a craft characterised by the 'irreducible uncertainties' of the situations encountered by teams on the ground. As Champy argues (Champy, 2018:17), 'when action is required in highly singular and complex situations, common solutions that can be automatically inferred from routines, rules or scientific knowledge, might lead to mistakes and damages. Indeed, the singularity of the situation may imply that… the situation does not allow for a high degree of certainty'. In such situations, transmission of knowledge between peers is critical.

The first two articles of this issue remind us of the importance of considering side by side the safety of humanitarian personnel and the protection of civilians – a necessary reminder given that in relief agencies the vocabulary of security has far outweighed that of the protection of civilians. Xavier Crombé and Joanna Kuper describe and analyse violence that affects caregiving and show that violence against humanitarian workers is linked to war violence in general. They question humanitarian responsibility in conflict situations towards both populations and its staff, especially national staff. Echoing this practical analysis, Miriam Bradley questions the different values attributed to different lives, related to the asymmetric attention given to the safety of humanitarian personnel and civilians.

Practices are also at the heart of Fabrice Weissman and Emmanuelle Strub's articles. The first reviews the painful issue of kidnappings of humanitarian workers to put forward a proposal to end, or at least soften, the rule of silence that is generally imposed within the sector. Weissman argues secrecy is often as much of an impediment to resolving current cases as it is to preventing and managing futures ones. Strub questions the definition of risk-management policy from the point of view of the NGO security advisor responsible. She highlights the tensions she experienced in her role, in particular the lack of institutional support from the very institution that tasked her with defining those policies. She also warns of the contemporary trend to shift the use of risk management from enabling operations and facilitating access to populations to protecting the organisation from legal or reputational risks.

All the contributions demonstrate that a reliance on international humanitarian law (IHL) and humanitarian principles to ensure the security of humanitarian teams and projects might well be unfounded. Rony Brauman offers his own historical perspective, challenging the idea of humanitarian exceptionalism and the protective function of IHL and principles.

The last article exemplifies the journal's ambition to create a bridge between academia and practitioners. The joint contribution by historian Kevin O'Sullivan and aid worker Réiseal Ní Chéilleachair describes the results of a pilot project on using historical reflection as a tool for policy-making in the humanitarian sector. It focuses on humanitarian experiences in Somalia, one of the turning points of risk management in humanitarian security in the early 1990s.

By establishing experiences at the heart of discussions on risk management, we hope that this second issue of the *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* will encourage critical reflections on the security of aid work and the further sharing of experiences. We hope, too, that practitioners and researchers will find more reasons to engage with one another, on this topic as on others, as the world of uncertainties will only be contained through the sharing and analysis of earnest accounts and studies.

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