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Can we predict a humanitarian emergency?

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Since the end of the Cold War, the humanitarian field has witnessed the emergence of new early warning systems, as well as the improvement of old ones, the purpose being to alert us of imminent humanitarian emergencies. To date, notwithstanding the proliferation of these instruments, their capacity to function effectively within the framework of humanitarianism is questionable. In discussing whether or not early warning systems can be made to function as planned, I argue that their current dysfunction within the humanitarian field is due the existence of a particular emergency imaginary.

Starting briefly with terminology, an early warning system can be defined as any 'analytic forecasting tool' or 'any initiative that focuses on systematic data collection, analysis and/or formulation of recommendations, including risk assessment and information sharing'. The indicators used to collect data are those of potential conflict, food shortages and other related issues.

The objective of early warning systems is to allow for an early intervention by governments and other humanitarian actors (such as international organisations and NGOs), in order to reduce the possible predicaments deriving from an imminent hazard.

Early warning systems are now characterised by a higher degree of sophistication and reliability than ever before, thanks to consistent investments in this sector. Yet they do not function as planned in the hands of humanitarian actors in terms of risk prevention or reduction. To date, in addressing their inadequacy, the relevant literature seems to only focus on their technical and operational shortcomings.

Through the myopic identification of technical and operational shortcomings as the root cause of early warning systems' dysfunction, though, the relevant literature seems to implicitly assert that improvements in the areas where these shortcomings are present may eventually transform early warning systems into efficient tools in the hands of humanitarian actors.

However, operational and technical deficiencies are only one of the aspects – albeit probably the most apparent – which explain why these instruments do not function adequately. Moreover, the focus on the technical fixes necessary to overcome the deficiencies mentioned above risks overlooking the real obstacle preventing early warning systems from functioning in the humanitarian field as intended: the current emergency imaginary.

The notion of 'emergency' has a broad meaning that includes any sort of disaster or crisis, ranging from natural catastrophes and conflicts to other forms of human suffering. As noted by prominent scholars like Calhoun and Cannon, even though there must be material conditions—either natural or depending on human agency—for an emergency to happen, this notion is socially constructed. Indeed, this construction of the 'emergency imaginary' is pivotal, as it *'shapes the definition and rhetoric of emergencies, the ways in which they are produced and recognised, and the organisation of intervention'* (emphasis added).

Within this imaginary, emergencies are perceived as sudden and unpredictable events in contrast with the normal order. Thus, while Cannon argues that patterns of people's vulnerability to the hazards that lead to emergencies develop over the course of time, the current emergency imaginary seems, instead, to consider emergencies as proceeding from 'a background of ostensible normalcy, causing suffering or danger and demanding urgent response'. The way media speaks about emergencies (as being shocking and unexpected) represents proof of this social construction of emergencies.

The emergency imaginary's emphasis on the immediacy of each occurrence and not on its causes affects the scope of the humanitarian response required. Such an imaginary provides an idea of humanitarianism based upon the concept of urgency —that is, the necessity of providing an immediate response to an acute and unpredictable need. It also recalls the older value of charitable action, whose purpose is sympathy and mitigation of suffering, not the transformation of the social order. As so constructed, humanitarian action should be 'free from longer-term political and economic entanglements' and should be limited to providing material assistance and relief from suffering through, for example, the distribution of food, medical supplies, and the building of shelters.

It can be argued that, since the end of World War II the current emergency imaginary has developed what is now called 'classic humanitarianism', that is, the idea of a humanitarian intervention free from any political and economic bias and geared to saving lives, not livelihoods. Additionally, the notion of 'classic humanitarianism' has not been relegated to the theoretical realm but has become the distinctive feature of the ICRC's action, as it appears clear from its Fundamental Principles.

Returning to the early warning systems, it seems, at this point, that the current emergency imaginary leaves no room for their proper functioning in the hands of humanitarian actors. As long as emergencies are socially constructed as sudden and unpredictable events that are outside the normal order of things and demand immediate response, the scope of humanitarian intervention seems to be limited only to those acts providing material relief from suffering after the outbreak of an emergency and lasting until the end of it. Earlier actions, which are performed on the basis of early warning systems and attempt to hinder any emergencies from breaking out, are therefore outside its scope.

Events surrounding the 2011 famine in Somalia support this argument. At the time, the famine seemed to have come as a surprise. However, states had collected several early warnings over the course of the preceding years—they just did not take action until the famine had been declared by the UN and had reached the front covers of newspapers. States, therefore, did not undertake any preventive humanitarian intervention before the situation fit the characteristics of an emergency as currently imagined and constructed.

Drawing on this example, it is clear that 'the failure of the international community to respond to potential crises before the declaration of a humanitarian catastrophe is not a technical failure of early warning'. Instead, it is a failure of humanitarianism itself, as constructed by the current emergency imaginary.

This argument is not meant to present early warning systems as fundamentally incompatible with humanitarianism. In fact, they may operate and become a valuable asset in the hands of humanitarian actors if a change in the current emergency imaginary occurs which draws us towards a social construction of emergencies as long term patterns of vulnerability developed through societal, economic and political factors.

The adoption of a new emergency imaginary would also entail a new and different humanitarian intervention with a more developmental approach to relief. Humanitarianism should not only be geared to saving lives but should also consist of an action early enough to protect livelihoods before lives are threatened, in accordance with people's own priorities. It is also worth noting that this approach in favour of a new – and more appropriate – construction of the emergency imaginary and, subsequently, of humanitarianism is already present in the mandates of several international organisations and NGOs, which attempt to combine humanitarian intervention along with developmental goals.

Early warning systems *can* be fit for humanitarian intervention. However, what is primarily needed for this to occur is not, as most of the relevant literature seems to suggest, the resolution of their operational and technical shortcomings. Only accepting a new emergency paradigm, which shapes a different notion humanitarian intervention, as capable of achieving developmental objectives through early actions, may allow humanitarian actors to fully take advantage of the life-saving function of early warning systems.

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