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# THE ABSENCE OF A UNIVERSAL DEFINITION OF HUMANITARIANISM

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The obstacles towards reaching a single definition



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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to discuss what the obstacles are to reaching a universal definition of humanitarianism. It is known that such a definition is not in existence, but what are the reasons for this? The search to answer this question is based on a literature review. First it will be discussed what the advantages and disadvantages are of not having a universal definition. Then the origins of humanitarianism are debated, to continue with an examination of the transformations that humanitarianism has undergone since it came into being. The result of this study is the conclusion that the main obstacle towards reaching a universal definition of humanitarianism are the two distinct branches of humanitarianism, one that concerns itself with providing immediate relief in a crisis situation and one that concerns itself with eliminating the underlying causes of human suffering. Another prominent obstacle is that a rigid definition of humanitarianism would lose its advantage of being adaptable to the context in which it operates. If it is decided that these obstacles must be overcome, further research is necessary to decide who then has to provide the definition.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without Professor José Fischel. I took his class “International Refugee and Human Rights Law” during my exchange at the University of Milan, where during one of the lectures a humanitarian emergency was discussed. He made a comment that the UN does not have its own definition of humanitarianism, and that he has been trying for a few years to get one of his students to write his or her dissertation about this topic. The result of that comment lies here before you. Thank you, José.

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# Table of Contents

- ABSTRACT.....2**
- ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....3**
- INTRODUCTION.....5**
  - PROBLEM STATEMENT .....5
  - RESEARCH OBJECTIVES .....6
  - RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....6
  - METHODOLOGY.....7
- CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....8**
  - WHAT IS A BUZZWORD .....8
  - HOW TO CREATE A BUZZWORD .....9
  - HOW DOES IT WORK.....9
  - HOW TO MOVE AHEAD .....10
- ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF HUMANITARIANISM AS A BUZZWORD .....11**
  - CONTRADICTIONS IN HUMANITARIANISM .....11
  - ADVANTAGES .....12
  - DISADVANTAGES.....13
- THE ORIGINS OF HUMANITARIANISM.....14**
  - EARLY HUMANITARIANISM.....14
  - UNDERLYING REASONS .....14
  - INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS.....15
- THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF HUMANITARIANISM.....17**
  - TRANSFORMATION OF HUMANITARIANISM IN THE 1990S .....17
  - RELATION BETWEEN HUMANITARIANISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS .....18
  - WHY HUMANITARIANISM HAS CHANGED .....19
  - HUMANITARIANISM AND POWER.....20
- DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....22**
  - ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES.....22
  - ORIGINS .....22
  - TRANSFORMATIONS .....23
  - OBSTACLES .....23
  - METHODOLOGY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....24
- REFERENCES.....26**

## Introduction

### Problem statement

There is no universal definition of humanitarianism. Prominent figures in the humanitarian field have come to this realization and coined questions such as “what does the word humanitarian even mean?”. The director General of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has expressed that the roles of humanitarian actors are not clear anymore (Chandler, 2001). A study done by the Humanitarian Policy Group however has found widespread agreement on four key elements: the protection of life, health, subsistence and physical security. The humanitarian agenda encompasses more than only those key elements, but they represent agreed priorities and reflect a more general concern with reducing suffering and upholding human dignity (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003).

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) is the UN organization that is responsible for bringing together humanitarian actors for a proper response to emergencies (UNOCHA, 2017). In the Reliefweb Glossary of Humanitarian Terms, several humanitarian concepts are explained using UNOCHA’s definitions, examples are: humanitarian access, humanitarian assistance, humanitarian intervention, humanitarian operations, and some dozen more. But a definition of humanitarianism itself is nowhere to be found in the glossary (ReliefWeb, 2008). The British Red Cross has assembled a course to find out what humanitarianism is, but even they do not provide a definition in the end. Course participants are provided with definitions of humanitarian assistance, humanitarian citizen, humanitarian principle and humanitarian action, but when it comes to humanitarianism the participants have to come up with a definition themselves (British Red Cross, 2015). In a group activity they have to describe what humanitarianism means to them, but it is obvious it means many different things to many different people. The website “Inside Disaster” has provided an overview of some thoughts that humanitarian workers have on humanitarianism: “Humanitarianism is about bringing a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist” and “humanitarianism is by definition an emblem of failure, not success. The disaster has already happened” (InsideDisaster.com, n.d.). Douzinas (2007) describes that humanitarianism started as regulating war, but now has expanded to cover all aspects of culture and politics.

It may be clear that there is no worldwide consensus on what humanitarianism means, but why is this a problem? It promotes saving lives, reducing human suffering and protecting human dignity. Even if the precise definitions change from person to person, why question the concept? Using the notion of humanitarianism can advance an actor’s interests. A social or material project can be legitimized by describing it as a form of humanitarian assistance, and thus humanitarianism provides relief and reconstruction assistance but also aids in the political legitimacy. This legitimacy is not only used by governments, it is used by humanitarian agencies as well. They depict themselves as actors that have nothing to do with the territorial and political context in which they operate, thus legitimizing themselves, and use this language to attract a wider public and donors (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010).

In the past, concepts such as imperialism and colonialism were tolerated and legitimated. Rist (1997) explains in his book how the support for colonization came about in France: in just twenty years the country stood behind colonization. It was presented not as “a matter of choice

but as a matter of duty”, because colonization held the promise of bringing civilization to all the parts of the world. This is not to point out that humanitarianism is just as bad as colonization, or will become something of the sort. Of course when we judge history it needs to be placed in their context, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be critical of what we are doing today. It is not common to put question marks behind a concept that is presented as a human right, as a duty to the world. Nevertheless it is essential: “today’s verities are always in danger of becoming tomorrow’s” (Rist, 1997).

The importance of understanding what a concept means and what it is used for can be seen when you look at another concept without a universal definition: development. In his inaugural speech in 1949, President Truman made a distinction between “developed” countries and “developing” countries in the world. Outside of the Western World, people were no longer African, Asian or Latin American, they were no longer Balinese, Mongol, Quechua or Berber. They were now all the same: they were “underdeveloped”. This new definition was accepted by the Western States, because in this way they could benefit from the “aid” that was supposed to bring “development”. A development path was mapped out for the “underdeveloped” by the Western States and they were forced to follow that path, and they had to give up their identity and economic autonomy (Rist, 1997).

Seeing how things have gone so wrong in the past with concepts that were presented as ideas that would bring about a world where people are happier, live better and longer and a world that would be free of disease, poverty, exploitation and violence, it is necessary that we prevent ourselves from making the same mistakes. We can do this by taking a critical look at what exactly it is what we are doing. And if it is not exactly clear what humanitarianism is and means, then how do we know what we are doing?

### Research objectives

The aim of this thesis is to discuss if it is possible to come to a single definition of humanitarianism. This research has not been done before, which makes the scientific relevance of this thesis clear. The societal relevance of this thesis is to make sure we do not repeat the mistakes of the past, by taking a necessary critical look at what we are doing today. Because the notion of humanitarianism creates a certain legitimacy and has some power, it is important to know what it means and to make sure that it can and will not be abused by actors and/or organizations to advance their own interests without intending to pursue the agreed upon elements of the protection of life, health, subsistence and physical security. By outlining the conceptual framework of buzzwords, the benefits and downsides to not having a definition, the origins of humanitarianism and the changing context, this thesis aims to conclude what the obstacles are to reaching a universal definition of humanitarianism.

### Research questions

The main research question of this thesis is:

What are the obstacles to reaching a universal definition of humanitarianism?

This question will be answered with the help of the following sub-questions:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of not having a universal definition?

What are the origins of humanitarianism?

How has humanitarianism changed over time?

## Methodology

This thesis will be a literature review as it is not possible to conduct fieldwork within this timeframe. To find the literature needed to answer the main research question and the sub questions, I will use the Wageningen University Library, as well as Google Scholar and other fora such as jstor to find books and articles and other useful literature. To find the necessary literature I will use certain concepts and a combination of those concepts, such as: "humanitarianism", "humanitarianism origins", "buzzword". I will also make use of the books and articles provided to me by my supervisor and of previous courses I have taken at Wageningen University and the University of Milan.

As I mentioned in the acknowledgements, the idea for this thesis was not mine. However, I immediately found it interesting, because during this bachelor I discovered that what I want to do later in life is to work in the humanitarian field. Professor Fischel's comment made me realize that I had never really thought about what humanitarianism in itself means, and apparently that there is no universal definition of the word. Because the expectation is that for the majority of my life I will deal with this concept, I wanted to research why this is the case.

## Conceptual Framework

This chapter aims to discuss the buzzword concept. It states first what exactly a buzzword is and how a buzzword is created. Then it moves on to see how a buzzword works, and once it is established that a word is in fact a buzzword, the chapter finally provides a few ways on how to move forward from then on.

### What is a buzzword

Buzzwords are referred to by some as plastic words, because the words share the characteristics of actual plastic: buzzwords are flexible, can be used for many purposes and are present everywhere. Buzzwords are also very resilient and long-lasting. Like plastic, it is not “biodegradable”, and they never go away (Van der Laan, 2001). Buzzwords can be customized similar to Lego building blocks, another reason why buzzwords are compared to plastic, and they imply amongst others:

- accomplishment
- basic needs
- development
- growth
- health
- living standard
- process, progress, project
- quality
- service, strategy
- value (Van der Laan, 2001)

As was stated in the introduction, humanitarianism is about saving lives, reducing human suffering and protecting human dignity. It is also often based on four elements: the protection of life, health, subsistence and physical security. The word humanitarianism therefore implies a lot of the things that any buzzword implies. Everyone can use a buzzword in a way he likes and suggest with it that in the future everything will be better than now. It is why Loughlin (2002) says that buzzwords are used by policy-makers: they are selected especially because their meaning is so vague.

With buzzwords there is a general agreement on what the abstract words mean, but there is a lot of disagreement about what the words mean in practice. These words have in common that they seem to promote universal values, but there are also words in the vocabulary that are only meaningful to those within the borders of humanitarianism. According to Cornwall (2007) this is another aspect of a buzzword: they sound intellectual and scientific, and are only understood by experts.

According to Rist (2007), buzzwords such as development and humanitarianism can mean a “global promise of happiness” and it is logical that humanitarianism has a certain attractiveness to many people: the people who want to improve their lives and living conditions but also those who want social justice for everyone. Humanitarianism is just an assumption about what you can do as a person and there is no single definition of the word. For Rist those are the two elements of a buzzword: the lack of a real definition and the strong belief in what humanitarianism is supposed to bring about (2007).



## How to create a buzzword

Buzzwords get their “buzz” because they describe what is in vogue. Some buzzwords disappear quickly and emerge later on again, others keep existing for decades. In order for the buzzword to become institutionalized by agencies they are emptied of their meaning (Cornwall, 2007). This is what Nuijten (2016) described as well: in academic or political fields concepts are created, which are then taken up on by other programs. These programs then empty the concepts of their contents, giving them ambiguous meanings, and thus a buzzword is created.

In his article about buzzwords in the health industry, Loughlin (2002) describes the process of how a word becomes a buzzword and is used in policies. You pick a word because it has a good ring to it or because it is already widely used, and then you try to encourage a common regular use of the word in the health service. At some point, you state that the word has become a key-concept in the health service, or even a corner stone of health care.

This process is highlighted by Van der Laan (2001) as well: buzzwords emerge in everyday language but are then picked up by the scientific field and reshaped before they return to the everyday language again. The word receives a scientific layer that gives them that something special, because in our field of human knowledge, science receives the most respect and we see it as the highest and final authority. That scientific layer therefore adds to the importance of the buzzword.

There is also a certain universality about buzzwords, that hides their local origin: only a few of the buzzwords are actually translated to other local languages, many are just used in other languages as a loan-word (Cornwall, 2007). The result is that buzzwords are nonspecific, context-autonomous and abstract nouns. A buzzword is therefore so general that it can apply to everything, and according to Van der Laan therefore it actually applies to nothing. The broader the application is of a buzzword, the less it means (2001).

## How does it work

A buzzword works because it can be used as a slogan and slogans help sell ideas: They are short, simple and easy to remember (Godin, 2006). The vague meanings buzzwords have and their ability to encompass a lot of meanings gives the buzzword a lot of power (Cornwall, 2007). It also makes little sense to be opposed to something that is about humanitarianism. When speaking about it you suggest you are promoting saving lives, security and reducing human suffering. These things are generally considered to be good, so by using humanitarianism in policies, an environment is created where it is nearly impossible to not agree with those policies, because who is against saving lives and reducing human suffering (Loughlin, 2002)?

Loughlin (2002) sums up three consecutive rules to be followed in order for a buzzword to work: First you need to formulate some foundational principles, these principles should be righteous and only someone who is unreasonable could object to these principles. He then states that you need to produce many documents where you describe the principles and how they are your vision for the future. The explanation of the principles should be just as unclear as the principles itself. You need to challenge others to try to explain what your vision means to them, which is useful because the responsibility is now with the other person to make sense of what you are saying and to provide an explanation. Second, you need to give the idea of a scientific theory, find relationships between the foundational principles of the theory but do

not state precisely what those relationships are. Loughlin suggests using a lot of diagrams, because the more components the diagram has, the more they make the reader feel that you are saying something that is very complicated. And the more the reader gets the feeling that he is reading a complicated piece, the less he is likely to criticize that piece, the less he will try to find out exactly what is being said and whether or not you have actually provided evidence to support what you have said. The last step is to insert pieces of common sense into the difficult jargon, pieces that are so obvious that no one would contest or question them. You find a way to demonstrate what you are saying with real-life examples. It is to suggest that your principles actually provide some truth to the pieces of common sense. The reader can then connect to the complicated text he has just read and it will give him the idea that the scientific theory states some significant propositions after all (Loughlin, 2002).

### How to move ahead

When it is stated that a word is a buzzword, there are numerous things you can do next. Rist (2007) suggests to come up with a proper definition that plainly states what it is about and what it actually promotes. You would have to put aside the emotional and normative associations and incorporate the external characteristics that anyone can observe. A definition of a buzzword should therefore not be based on what you think it is or want you want it to be, but the definition should be based on the things you can actually identify (Rist, 2007).

Cornwall (2007) provides a number of different options. Instead of providing a definition for a buzzword you can get rid of the word all together and simply never use it again and hope that others will follow your example. You then replace the buzzword with a new, alternative concept. Another option is to use the buzzwords as leverage for change. If the opposition takes up the terms and framework suggested, do not see this as failure but as victory, and as the important first step to change. To change the terrain of the discourse is convenient, because you can confront the opposition on the terrain you have chosen. A third option is to take apart the different meanings that a buzzword has and reflect on them. The process of reflection can reveal the differences between the definition and possibly show the ideological differences in these different definitions and open up the debates. A last option Cornwall suggest on what to do next is to look at the chain of equivalent words that the buzzword appears in. Words acquire their meaning in the context in which they are used, and their meaning is relative to the words that surround them. The more words there are in a chain, the more the meaning of one word depends on all the other words in the chain. Putting a word in a different chain might open up new meanings or show meanings that never fully emerged in the previous chain. A tired buzzword can in this way be revived.

This chapter has shown that buzzwords are flexible, omnipresent and long-lasting. They are created in a scientific context where they are emptied of their meanings, and their lack of content is what makes them powerful. It is difficult to be opposed to positive buzzwords such as humanitarianism and development, since they represent basic needs, health and values. But are buzzwords a positive thing? Their lack of meaning makes them favorite to use when making policies, but if it the end these policies imply everything and therefore nothing, should we not look ahead? On the other hand, their lack of a single definition makes them frequently used in everyday language, and since they represent all these positive things, are there not more advantages than disadvantages to buzzwords? The next chapter aims to discuss these advantages and disadvantages of buzzwords in relation to humanitarianism.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of Humanitarianism as a Buzzword

The previous chapter ended with an overview on how to move ahead when you have realized that a word is a buzzword. But why should we move ahead? Are buzzwords then only a negative thing, or are there some benefits to using buzzwords? This chapter will debate why humanitarianism was susceptible to becoming a buzzword, and what the benefits of this are and what the negative aspects are.

### Contradictions in humanitarianism

In the previous chapter it was explained that the buzzword “humanitarianism” is defined by two elements: the lack of a real definition and the strong belief in what humanitarianism is supposed to bring about. Humanitarianism is about saving lives, reducing human suffering and protecting human dignity. Thus, there is a strong belief in what humanitarianism is supposed to bring about. Even though this is the case, there is not a real definition of humanitarianism, and therefore it proves to be a buzzword. In his book *Empire of humanity: a history of humanitarianism* (2011), Barnett describes how humanitarianism had been plagued by elements that are opposites and not reconcilable, but are always present nonetheless. These elements show why up until today, there is no real definition of humanitarianism.

There are two types of humanitarianism: emergency humanitarianism, that focuses on symptoms and comes in action during a conflict or after a disaster has taken place to provide immediate relief, and what Barnett calls “alchemical” humanitarianism, which not only provides immediate relief after a disaster has struck or during a conflict, but stays to find and eliminate the root causes of human suffering (Barnett, 2011). These types of humanitarianism differ in how they understand humanitarianism, its principles and its relationship to politics. Emergency humanitarianism was the standard type for a very long time. A worldwide known example is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), that bases its definition of humanitarianism on the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence, in order to provide relief to the people who are suffering from a conflict or a natural disaster. Those who were humanitarians in the alchemical branch avoided the discourse of humanitarianism and focused on the discourse of relief and development. The two types of humanitarianism were thus separated for a very long time, but in the 1990s the different types started to cross paths in relief and reconstruction operations and since then had to spend more time to think about the meaning of humanitarianism. Emergency humanitarians fear that if the meaning of humanitarianism includes eliminating the root causes of suffering as well that humanitarianism will become politicized, and that it will compromise the ability of aid workers to save lives, because how can one be impartial, neutral and independent in a political context (Barnett, 2011)?

Humanitarian ethics are considered to be universal and circumstantial: in the West we see humanity as the desire to help people in need, no matter their place or face. The ways we see humanitarianism is presented as ensuring human rights as our duty to the world. Its ethics are therefore universal. But it is important to realize how the universal is actually shaped by the circumstantial. The humanitarian ethic to intervene to stop human suffering and to confer dignity is rooted in our contemporary notions of humanity and victimhood (Barnett, 2011).

Humanitarianism is about keeping people alive, to increase their opportunities in life and to give them more control over their fates. Humanitarianism achieves this through interventions that are defended on the grounds that they improve the health and welfare of those who are not strong and powerful enough to help themselves. But every act of intervention is also an act of control. Humanitarian governance may be done for all the right reasons, but it is still governance and that always comes with power. In humanitarianism there is always a presence of care and control, and this has increased as states have become more and more involved in humanitarian operations. But even before the intensified presence of states humanitarianism was defined by this paradox, because the very idea of humanitarianism is that the people who can act should act in situations where you can improve the welfare of those who cannot improve their welfare themselves. Those who rescue tend to think that they can speak on behalf of those they are rescuing; that they know better what victims need than the victims themselves and that their privileged position gives them the expertise, wisdom and insights that victims lack. There is not a way to ensure that the voices of the victims are heard and honoured as well. A balance still has to be found on how to incorporate those voices with the belief that you must be doing the right thing, even if others do not see it as the right thing (Barnett, 2011).

Humanitarianism is about meeting the needs of others and meeting our own needs. It is about saving other people's lives, reducing other people's suffering and protecting other people's dignity. But why do we do this? Our own needs may be the main factor that promotes humanitarianism. We may help others because we are motivated by a feeling of power, control and superiority. We may help others because we feel a sense of guilt. We may help others because of the promise of religious redemption and salvation. We may help others because we want to show others our goodness. We may help others because want to show remorse for the past and to repair the relationships with the people around us. There may be many more reasons, but it is clear that by helping other people meet their needs, we are also helping ourselves meeting our own needs (Barnett, 2011).

### Advantages

Now that it is established that humanitarianism is a buzzword, is it possible to see this as something positive? What are the advantages that there is no real definition of humanitarianism?

One of the advantages of a buzzword is that because it represents so many things it reduces the size of the vocabulary and thus makes a language more efficient. Too many words that all have a different meaning makes communication complicated, and therefore inefficient. Being able to use one word for many different meanings therefore leads to efficiency (Van der Laan, 2001). We speak of humanitarianism when relief is provided during a conflict or after a disaster. When food drops are being made, when camps are built to provide shelter, when schools are built to provide education, or when local health clinics try to provide everything from vaccinations to emergency treatment. We speak of humanitarianism when we talk about saving lives, reducing human suffering and protecting human dignity. Rather than having to communicate entire paragraphs about what it is that one is doing, saying "humanitarianism" grasps everything that is stated above and more. It is very efficient word use.

Another advantage is that the meaning of humanitarianism encompasses many things and thus the vagueness of the concept adds to can be used it in a way to suit specific agendas, and implying that in the future everything will be better. It is why policy-makers are fond of using buzzwords. They are short, simple and easy to remember and therefore very useful when wanting to sell ideas to the public (Godin, 2006). When speaking of humanitarianism this is certainly the case, because who can be opposed to something that suggests you are promoting all these positive things that humanitarianism represents?

Not having a definition that is set in stone also means that the meaning of humanitarianism can change with time. According to the different context in which we are living, we may change opinions in what we want to bring about. It is possible to incorporate lessons learned from mistakes made in the past, as well as adjusting the meaning of humanitarianism if new situations are encountered. This advantage can best be made clear when taking a look at the definition of a refugee, which was agreed upon by states in 1951: "For the purposes of the present Convention, the term "refugee" shall apply to any person who: (2) As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well- founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is out- side the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (UN General Assembly, 1951). What if people are forced to leave their country because it has completely flooded as a result of climate change. Do they not deserve international protection? They do not have the possibility to be protected by their own state, because it would not even exist anymore. If situations were to arise that are at the moment not incorporated in humanitarianism, the principles could change, precisely because a universal definition does not have to be taken into account.

### Disadvantages

It's vagueness is therefore at the same time a disadvantage. Because there is no real definition of humanitarianism, it can easily be used by policy-makers to imply all the good intentions, because the audience will fill in the meaning. Not everyone in the audience is the same, so different people will attach different meanings to it (Cornwall, 2007). When a word is so general that it has the ability to apply to everything, it actually applies to nothing (Van der Laan, 2001). There is therefore a lot of space for the policy-maker to move around and there will be no significant consequences if the policy-maker does not deliver on the promise, because who knows exactly what has been said anyway (Cornwall, 2007). Loughlin (2002) even goes so far as to say that the vagueness of buzzwords is used to control and manipulate populations by implying that something good will be done, but in reality buzzwords are only being used to gain support for their policies.

This chapter has shown the advantages and disadvantages of humanitarianism as a buzzword, and also the contradictories that are present in humanitarianism that led it to become a buzzword. But where does humanitarianism come from? That is what the next chapter aims to discuss.

## The Origins of Humanitarianism

The main aim of this thesis is to understand what the obstacles are to reaching a single definition of humanitarianism. To understand why this is so difficult to achieve today, it is important to understand where humanitarianism comes from, what its past is, in order to fully understand the movement. Often enough the origins of humanitarianism are sought in the creation of the ICRC in 1863, but this is only the origins of the so-called emergency humanitarianism. If we go further back in history it is also possible to discover the origins of the so-called alchemical humanitarianism.

The discussion of the history of the humanitarianisms is focused on the West, because the current international humanitarian order is rooted in Western history and became global as a response to interests and ideas that originated in the West (Barnett, 2011).

### Early humanitarianism

Humanitarianism is associated with alleviating human suffering, and can be traced back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Back then, humanitarianism was understood as something that aimed for the improvement of education, prison reform and putting a stop to people being imprisoned because of a debt (Carlton, 1906). Another humanitarian movement at that time had its roots in the idealism and rationalism that was present in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Women and child labour, juvenile crime, unemployment and the bad influence life in the crowded cities had on families was ever-present then, and humanitarians wanted better treatment of the working class (Carlton, 1906). In less than a century, humanitarians had achieved that the position of criminals was improved, the conditions of the working class were improved, there was less poverty, better care for the sick and insane and less cruelty towards animals (Parmelee, 1915).

The initial domestic focus of humanitarians was soon expanded to transnational interests, when the antislavery movements came about. Various methods were applied by the leaders of the abolition movement to get the British people to sympathize with the slaves: pamphlets describing the practices and consequences of slavery were distributed, former slaves were telling their stories, they showed how slaves were brutally disciplined with whips and thumbscrews. They made people think whether or not they had a part in slavery, because the sugar people put in their tea was produced on slave islands. The Abolition Acts were established in 1806-07 and the emancipation of the slaves in 1834. However, even though slavery was now prohibited by law, there were problems with enforcing the law and questions about what to do with slaves that had escaped from places where it was still allowed. For the first time in history, a very large number of people were angry and stayed angry because of the rights of people on another continent (Barnett, 2011).

### Underlying reasons

Why has humanitarianism come into existence at that particular point? How can the origins be explained? One explanation is religion. The Christian ideas of charity have been important in Europe and North America (Davey, Borton & Foley, 2013). However, Christian religion has been in existence for two thousand years yet humanitarianism dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. An understandable reply is that up until then, the circumstances were not present for Christian religion to display its humanitarian influence. Except with that argument you simultaneously



acknowledge that besides Christianity there were other factors involved in the rise of the humanitarian movement, and those factors may have been more important than Christian religion (Parmelee, 1915).

What about Enlightenment? Certainly the scientific revolution gave people the idea that humans were capable of making a difference and causing moral improvement (Barnett, 2011). But the growing body of science was not enough. A traditional way for the people to contribute to alleviating human suffering came down to alms-giving, and helping people survive day to day. The fear increased that charity would bring out the worst in people, and would not encourage them to become independent and responsible persons. Other developments were the market expansion, urbanization and modernization. It gave people the desire to go beyond immediate relief and to address the root causes of human suffering (Barnett, 2011).

Many of these reasons are described by Parmelee as well. The Renaissance marked the start of the development of modern science which gave rise to the economic changes. The exploration of the rest of the world resulted in the extension of commercial relations. The industrial revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century led to the substitution of small scale domestic production for large scale machine methods of production and together with the international commercial relations this led to the interdependence of all the parts of the world. The means of communication and transportation became much faster than before, and with the steamship, railroad, telegraph and post, different parts of the world could be in touch with each other and got to know each other (Parmelee, 1915). The increasing interdependence of the parts of the world made people aware that it was in their own interest to care about the welfare of others. According to Parmelee, humane and cruel feelings have been present since a very long time, and with these recent ideas and knowledge the humane feelings were stimulated and the cruel feelings were restrained, and this led humanity in the direction of humanitarianism.

### International Committee of the Red Cross

Dunant was one of the five founders of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and he is considered to be the founding father of emergency humanitarianism (Barnett, 2011). Dunant was on a business mission in 1859 when he reached Castiglione delle Stiviere, where close by the Battle of Solferino was fought. French and Sardinian armies were fighting the Austrian army to unite Italy and the battle had killed more than six thousand soldiers and left more than thirty thousand soldiers wounded. Castiglione was soon filled with more than nine thousand victims of the battle and the available medical services were insufficient in providing proper aid. Dunant had no medical background but helped the best he could by trying to relieve the pain and the suffering of the wounded soldiers.

When Dunant returned to Geneva, he was unable to let go of what he had seen and from this point on in his life, his business career was inferior to his search to find a way that in future wars similar suffering as he saw as a result of the Battle of Solferino could be diminished (Bugnion, 2009). Dunant published *A Memory of Solferino* in 1862 in which he described war as he saw it, not as something heroic but as an event where soldiers were abandoned and suffered until they died (Barnett, 2011). He proposed that in every country there should be trained volunteers to help care for the wounded in times of war. He made a concept of an international treaty to ensure that nations would provide a more humane care for the wounded (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1986). The proposal stated that there would be

special protection for the wounded, it does not matter if they are civilians or soldiers, and in case of soldiers the protection would be granted regardless of their uniform. There would be a network of relief societies that would help save lives, encourage the Christian values of charity and giving, and promote the ideals of a civilized society (Barnett, 2011).

Dunant travelled Europe spreading his ideas and all doors were open for him because he was not the only one who had realized that war was not a chivalrous battle but more like a mass slaughter (Davey et al., 2013). His message reached the Geneva Society of Public Unity and in 1863 they created a committee consisting of Dunant, Moynier (a financier), Dufour (an army general), Appia and Maunoir (two doctors). All five men were very religious and occupied with moral progress. Governments discussing their proposals decided that special protection would be granted to all victims of war, and to prevent military personnel from becoming a target in wars they were declared neutral by the Geneva Conventions. This was the beginning of International Humanitarian Law, and the International Committee of the Red Cross was established to develop and protect it (Barnett, 2011).

With the creation of the first international humanitarian organization, humanitarian principles were turned into humanitarian actions. This is seen in the ICRC where the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence were put into action. The ICRC provides aid to whoever needs it (neutrality), wherever it is needed (impartiality) and independent of any government or political group (Skinner & Lester, 2010). Humanitarianism is still explained today with a reference to these principles that alleviate human suffering and with upholding human dignity. That is why the creation of the ICRC can be seen as the start of humanitarianism as we know it today.

This chapter has aimed to discuss the origins of humanitarianism, and shown that there are two separate moments that mark the start of the two branches of humanitarianism: the early 19<sup>th</sup> century for the beginning of alchemical humanitarianism concerned with the salvation of communities, and 1863 for the beginning of emergency humanitarianism concerned with alleviating human suffering. Although alchemical humanitarianism has been in existence longer than emergency humanitarianism, the latter has become the main explanation of humanitarianism today. The next chapter will go into the transformations that humanitarianism has undergone and the comeback of alchemical humanitarianism.



## The Changing Context of Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism these days is not the same as described in the previous chapter. After the Cold War, changes have occurred that have put alchemical humanitarianism back on the agenda again. This thesis aims to discuss the obstacles to reaching a single definition of humanitarianism, and this chapter shows why the current context of humanitarianism is one of those obstacles. First it will show how humanitarianism has changed in the post-Cold War era and discuss the increasing presence of human rights in humanitarianism. Then it will deliberate on the reasons behind the changes, and finally conclude with the growing power that states have in humanitarianism.

### Transformation of humanitarianism in the 1990s

Humanitarianism has changed in the 1990s. Before the end of the Cold War, humanitarianism concerned itself with alleviating human suffering and saving human lives, but not with the underlying causes that were the reasons for placing people at risk and for their suffering. Humanitarian organizations tried to operate independently of politics, and thus did not generally question the causes of suffering. To protect the fundamental principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, humanitarianism did not venture into those areas (Barnett, 2005). This is seen in humanitarian operations led by the United Nations as well: during the Cold War, if the conflict was still ongoing and far from its end, the UN seldom intervened. Usually it came into the picture when there was already a ceasefire in place, and the UN's role was to monitor that ceasefire (Duffield, 2001).

One way humanitarianism has changed is that previously it was seen as something automatically good in itself, it was a universal right. However humanitarianism started to have unforeseen consequences that would do more harm than good and such criticisms were influential in the 1990s. For example, Duffield (2001) shows how in an area where a humanitarian operation provided food assistance, unintended consequences emerged, such as that the extra food lowered the agricultural prices and as a result people stopped planting seeds. This led to people becoming dependent on the food aid, and such a result was not preferred. Instead of being regarded as a good thing, humanitarianism started to focus on what the future outcomes of a possible intervention would be. Humanitarianism should do no harm, and humanitarian action became conditional on the assumed good outcome. It has made a shift from so-called 'duty-based ethics' where the focus was only on its duty to relieve human suffering, to a so-called 'goal-based ethics' where its focus is now on the beneficial consequences (Duffield, 2001).

The provision of humanitarian aid has also changed. In the past there was a strict division between crisis and normality. The idea was that in a crisis all the regular institutions would stop functioning and be completely absorbed in the crisis. Humanitarian aid would then fill that temporary gap, and when the crisis was over the regular institutions would take over once again. In the last decade this view has changed. Not only came the realization that crisis and normality are not that easily separated, but during a crisis the humanitarian institutions would keep working with the local institutions as they had not stopped functioning in the crisis. Refugee camps were also seen as a place where people were completely cut off from their lives before the crisis, but this also turned out to be a mistaken assumption: people brought their social lives, political views and customs with them into the camp. These realizations have led

to the change in the provision of humanitarian aid. Instead of being viewed as vulnerable victims, the resilience of people and communities are taken into account. In addition, local institutions are now far more important in taking control of the response to the crisis and international aid has been increasingly withdrawn (unless it is a mega-disaster) (Hilhorst, 2016).

Since the 1990s humanitarianism has become more politicized. After the end of the Cold War, the humanitarian system has expanded. In the past, humanitarian actors defined humanitarianism as opposed to politics and the two were completely separated. Now, humanitarianism and politics are combined to try to eradicate the root causes of human suffering. Many states have acknowledged the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention and have humanitarian departments within their foreign ministry. States now fund relief operations, protect civilian populations and use their diplomatic and political power to develop humanitarian causes (Barnett, 2005).

Institutionalization has also taken place in the humanitarian field. Humanitarian agencies are more professional than ever before: in the past, there were relatively few agencies that were concerned with providing relief and codes of conduct and professional standards that defined the humanitarian field were not established. Standard procedures were not really in place, scientific knowledge was lacking and the people that ran the operations were often inexperienced. During the 1990s more recognition came for the humanitarian field, and with that more donors and suppliers. These new investors wanted the field to show them the effect of the donations and expected accountability. Codes of conduct for intervention came into place and the consequences of action were estimated and analyzed to improve the accountability. The field also became professionalized with specialized training and developing career paths (Barnett, 2005).

All these changes led to change in the meaning of humanitarianism as well. As discussed by the previous chapter, since the foundation of the ICRC humanitarianism was mainly understood as emergency humanitarianism, it concerned itself only with alleviating human suffering and saving lives, and was based on the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Nowadays alchemical humanitarianism has made a comeback, as it also encompasses development, rebuilding states, promoting democracy and human rights (Barnett, 2005).

### Relation between humanitarianism and human rights

The increasing presence of human rights in humanitarianism depicts a division between humanitarian organizations. No longer satisfied with abandoning the population as soon as the war was over, humanitarians wanted to stay to help the post-war societies find peace and justice (Barnett, 2011). A shift occurred from a needs-based humanitarianism towards a rights-based humanitarianism, but not every organization went along with this change of discourse. The organizations focused on relief, the emergency humanitarianism, always place survival over freedom, and provide aid where it is needed. The new rights-based humanitarianism is prepared to make the provision of aid conditional on that the human rights are not violated (Barnett, 2005).

The ICRC is one of the organizations that is still providing humanitarian aid and assistance based on its principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, and therefore the basis of humanitarian action is that it is provided there where it is needed. However, the new

humanitarianism no longer agreed with that vision, because in the Bosnian and Rwandan wars, this has meant that aid and assistance was also provided to the very ones responsible for the war crimes. It was their vision that a distinction must be made between the militias and the victims, and that humanitarian involvement cannot be impartial. The alchemical humanitarianism has made its comeback, as this “new humanitarianism” also aims to transform societies and eliminate the underlying causes of human suffering. Leading agencies are Oxfam, UNICEF and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). The latter was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999, which was seen as a statement that there is broad support for their vision that humanitarianism should fight injustice and persecution (Chandler, 2001).

It was already common practice for development aid to not come into action until certain conditions were met, but this was new to humanitarian aid. Some agencies see it as their moral and ethical obligation to withhold aid in some situations so that it is not used against the population. Conditional humanitarian aid arose when human rights became more prominent in humanitarianism (Chandler, 2001).

### Why humanitarianism has changed

Criticism on humanitarianism increased in the 1990s and not only because of the previously discussed dependency. Questions started to rise about the legitimacy and effectiveness of humanitarianism when it became clear that another unintended consequence in conflict situations was that humanitarian action could actually facilitate the war. Because of the humanitarian principle of neutrality, in the conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda, shelter, aid and assistance was provided to all civilians, that included the people who later were responsible for the ethnic cleansing and genocide that was committed in these wars (Barnett, 2005; Duffield, 2001). This led to the institutionalization discussed earlier in this chapter.

After the Cold War it seemed that there were more emergencies and crises than there were ever before. These emergencies and crises elsewhere were linked to the security in the West. The UN Security Council had defined threats to peace and security as when clashes between states were militarized or would become militarized in the future, when great powers were involved in a conflict or when the global stability was in danger. When domestic conflicts and civil wars started to destabilize regions and create mass flights, the Security Council authorized humanitarian interventions because the regional and international security was at risk (Barnett, 2005).

Humanitarianism was understood to encompass more practices and goals than ever before. This was the result of complex emergencies, when a man-made disaster and natural disaster occur at the same time. These emergencies resulted in state failures, fleeing civilians, militias and the presence of violence, diseases and hunger. Relief organizations had to negotiate with states, warlords and militias to gain access to the populations in need. Different agencies came to these fields to provide food, water and medicines, to protect human rights and to create democracies and economic growth. All these agencies claimed responsibility for the same populations and thus the meaning of humanitarianism broadened (Barnett, 2005).

The institutionalization that was explained earlier largely came about because governments warmed to the idea of humanitarian intervention and increased the funding of these operations. Between 1990 and 2000, the amount of money that was spent on humanitarian

action by states almost tripled, from 2.1 billion dollars to 5.9 billion dollars. The largest donors are the United States, the European Community Humanitarian Organization (ECHO), the United Kingdom, Canada and Japan. In return for their funds, states expected verification that their money was being well spent (Barnett, 2005).

After the Cold War the geopolitical field changed and state sovereignty was no longer inviolable. Sovereignty became dependent on states upholding the codes of conduct, protect their populations and having a democracy, rule of law and markets in place. In some instances organizations still only provided relief in emergency situations, while in other instances this new vision was being used to intervene in countries and to install agencies with the purpose of creating legitimate states and to tackle the root causes of human suffering (Barnett, 2005).

### Humanitarianism and power

As stated previously, not all organizations agreed with this new humanitarianism that not solely acted on needs and that moved into the political field. Organizations that defined themselves according to the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, the ICRC most notably, held their belief that relief must be provided to whoever needs it, wherever they may be, and that there must be a strict division between humanitarianism and politics (Chandler, 2001). They fear that if politics enters the field and if the principles are diminished that it would endanger humanitarianism (Barnett, 2005).

With money comes power, and with the funding of the states came the power that the states could use humanitarian intervention to further their own interests. Humanitarian organizations operating in Iraq after the invasion of the US that were receiving donations from the US were obligated to show the American flag. The work that these organizations were doing, such as providing food and shelter to the population, while showing the US flag was used to sell the war at the US and to create public support for the invasion. A US AID administrator had threatened that if the organizations that took US funding would not wave the flag, they would be replaced (Barnett, 2005).

Another way in which politics shows to have more power than the humanitarian organizations is when it comes to earmarked money. Usually the organization has the power to decide how the budget is allocated, but donors can earmark their money and make the decision for them how the money is being spent. This has meant a shift away from providing aid where it is needed, to providing aid in places that are of certain interest to the donating government. In 1988, 45 percent of the funding that humanitarian agencies received from states could be spend according to the agencies' own insights on where it was needed. 6 years later this percentage has dropped to 25. Instead of providing aid based solely on need, states are increasingly donating money to intervene in places that would suit their own interests. Between 1996 and 1999, the former Yugoslavia, Israel/Palestine and Iraq received 50 percent of all the available humanitarian assistance. If decisions were made based solely on needs, Sudan, Congo, Uganda and Angola would actually be on top of the list. Even though in the present time the budget for humanitarian aid is greater than ever before, conditions are placed on aid and the emergencies and crises that receive the least attention also receive the least aid (Barnett, 2005).

For a long time, alchemical humanitarianism was out of the picture, but since the end of the Cold War it has become very prominent, very quickly. Emergency humanitarianism, as provided by the ICRC, is still present but in the past two decades it has received a lot of criticism, stating that the humanitarian principles did not help the victims of the Bosnian and Rwandan wars. The ICRC in return criticizes the changes that humanitarianism has undergone, arguing that the interference of political powers and the conditional rights-based humanitarianism compromises the fundamental humanitarian principles and that not everyone who needs aid now actually receives aid.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### Advantages and disadvantages

The absence of a universal definition of humanitarianism has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that because humanitarianism encompasses many things, such as alleviating human suffering, providing immediate relief after an emergency (food, shelter) and saving lives, it creates a certain efficiency. Rather than having to cite a whole list of actions, the notion of humanitarianism delivers the same message.

Not having a definition that is set in stone enables the meaning of humanitarianism to change with time. According to the different contexts in which people are living, they may change opinions in what they want to bring about. Actions that have been executed in the past in the name of humanitarianism, may today be regarded as mistakes. This can be seen in the example of Rwanda and Bosnia, where assistance was provided according to the principle of needs. Later it turned out that the very people that were responsible for the mass slaughters had benefitted from the aid that was provided. The principles of humanitarianism are able to change, precisely because a universal definition does not have to be taken into account.

Not only is it possible to incorporate lessons learned from mistakes, if new situations arise that would fit the notion of humanitarianism, those situations can be incorporated as well. This advantage was shown with the example of the definition of a refugee, where new situations have risen in which UNHCR would consider them to be refugees, but according to the definition that was written down in the 1951 Convention, these people would not have the same rights and duties. In case such a thing would ever happen in a humanitarian situation, there would not be a problem because the principles are open to change.

Using humanitarianism in policy-making is also a quick way to gather a lot of people in unity. Because humanitarianism promotes many good things, nobody is really opposed to it. Using the concept in policy agendas is pretty much a certainty that the public will stand behind those policies. At the same time this proves to be a disadvantage. An argument has been made that when a concept implies many things at the same time, it actually implies nothing. There is a lot of space for the policy maker to move around, and there will be no real consequences if the promise is not delivered. How can you hold the policy-maker accountable for not delivering certain promises, if no one knows exactly what has been said?

### Origins

When the origins of humanitarianism are described, authors often refer to the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross by Dunant in 1863. While it can be said that this is true for the type of humanitarianism that concerns itself with the provision of immediate relief that is based on needs, the other type of humanitarianism came into existence about half a century before the establishment of the ICRC. This type of humanitarianism has been dubbed alchemical humanitarianism by Barnett (2011).

The earliest form of humanitarianism in the West concerned itself with prison reform and improvements in education. Shortly after that the focus of humanitarianism changed from national to transnational views, and the antislavery movements started. With the industrial revolution and the technology that became available, the world had become a smaller place.

The steamship, railroad, telegraph and post had the result that all the parts of the world were now in contact with each other, but they were also dependent on each other. People were aware that it was in their own interest to care about the welfare of others.

After witnessing the battle of Solferino, Dunant left his business career for what it was and concerned himself with the wellbeing of soldiers and civilians in war-torn countries. He made proposals that there would be special protection for the wounded, whether they were civilians or soldiers, and in the case of soldiers regardless of their uniforms. A network of relief societies should be established that would save lives and promote Christian values. Together with four other men, Dunant worked with governments, and their work led to the creation of International Humanitarian Law, and the establishment of the ICRC that should develop and protect this Law. The aid that the ICRC would provide was based on the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.

### Transformations

The ICRC and its principles were the leading standard in humanitarianism for the decades to come. It wasn't until the 1990s that critiques started to rise about the ICRC's mode of operation and that these critiques led to change. Humanitarianism was always seen as something that was good in itself, but now the results of interventions became important. There was fear that humanitarianism led to dependency, and that it could do more harm than good. People were also realizing that during a crisis, normal life would not be temporarily on hold. This led to the change that people's resilience is now taken into account and that local institutions instead of international institutions take control of the crisis response.

The humanitarian field has also become politicized and institutionalized, and the language of rights became important again. Much of this can be attributed to the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, when the provision of aid based on needs was seriously put into question. The ICRC stuck to their principles, but other organizations such as MSF, UNICEF and Oxfam are providing aid and assistance based on rights instead of needs.

After the Cold War, the geopolitical field has changed and state sovereignty became dependent on whether or not states were upholding the codes of conduct and the protection of their citizens. The funding of humanitarian operations also increased significantly. While these changes may sound positive, they are also prone to abuse. States could now use humanitarianism to further their own interests. When the US invaded Iraq, humanitarian organizations that received state funding were obligated to show the US flag, so that the state could sell the war at home.

### Obstacles

The absence of a universal definition of humanitarianism has been embedded in the concept of buzzwords. A buzzword is flexible, can be used for many purposes and can be found everywhere. They have the ability to imply many things at the same time, such as basic needs, development, living standard, quality and value. Humanitarianism also implies a variety of meanings: saving lives, reducing human suffering and the protection of human dignity. Humanitarianism is supposed to bring about a happier, more just world. If the fact that humanitarianism is a buzzword is considered to be a problem, one of the ways to solve this is to provide a definition.



This thesis has shown that there are quite some obstacles in the way of reaching a universal definition of humanitarianism. In the first place, there are enough advantages, more so than disadvantages. Being able to change a concept according to the context and time, and to learn from mistakes or incorporate new issues, is a very important advantage. Even though there are few disadvantages, they are quite major. Being able to abuse this notion is quite harmful. As a policy-maker, you have the power and the ability to control and manipulate the population when using the concept of humanitarianism. Does this disadvantage not outweigh all the advantages? The definition of a refugee may be rigid, at least it cannot be abused by politicians, organizations and agencies to further their own interests. Is it not more beneficial for the people we claim we are trying to help if their position cannot be abused? US President Nixon has said in 1968 that “the main purpose of American aid is not to help other nations but to help ourselves” (Chandler, 2001). Creating a universal definition of humanitarianism would most likely prevent such actions.

The step that humanitarian organizations have taken towards politics have thus undermined their neutrality and independence. This step was made simultaneously as the move from a needs-based approach towards a rights-based approach. Agencies gave up their neutrality because it was in their opinion that not everyone who needed help actually deserved help. The now much used example of the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia led many organizations to believe that the provision of aid based on rights was the better approach.

It may be clear that not all organizations shared that belief. Who decides what is right and just? With the provision of aid in Rwanda and Bosnia many criminals received assistance, but not all the refugees were guilty of the genocides. In Zaire, up to 200,000 people were murdered. These are terrible numbers, but if aid was completely withheld, some 750,000 children who were under the age of 5 would also not have received aid (Chandler, 2001).

This is not all. The language of human rights can also be manipulated. The treatment and protection of prisoners of war is regulated in the Geneva Conventions. According to article 13, prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1949). The people that the US holds as prisoners in Guantanamo Bay have no rights, for the reason that they are murderers and a threat to Western society. Even though this is a violation of international law, in the language of human rights this can be justified (Douzinas, 2007). It is not difficult to then see why the ICRC would stick to its principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. However, this has led to two major branches of humanitarianism, which is another obstacle. How to reach a definition that encompasses the values and principles of both branches?

### [Methodology and recommendations for further research](#)

This thesis was a literature review, no fieldwork has been conducted to gain information. It can be questioned if fieldwork is even necessary because the discussion was solely based on theory. Even if fieldwork would not be relevant, the literature review proved to have limitations as well. I did not have access to many articles that seemed useful for this discussion, and Wageningen’s own library has a limited amount of books and articles related to this topic. Language was sometimes also a limitation: I could not always use the sources of the articles that I had found because I did not speak the language in which that article or book was written. There was also a limited amount of time in which I had to write this thesis. There is always more information



available that is useful for this topic, which could perhaps have broadened its scope, but it was not feasible to search for this information within this time frame.

The purpose of this thesis was to discover the obstacles towards reaching a universal definition of humanitarianism. Questions then arise about how to overcome these obstacles to reach a universal definition. For example, the obstacle that there are two branches of humanitarianism can be quite easily overcome, if instead of one, two definitions are provided. The branch of alchemical humanitarianism can enter the Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD) field, as both have the vision of eradicating the underlying causes of human suffering. The branch of emergency humanitarianism can then become simply humanitarianism. Further research is necessary for the feasibility of this proposal.

Further research is also necessary in who will provide the definitions. Would it be the implementers of humanitarianism, the people who experience humanitarianism or academics? Is the necessity of having definitions even an existing problem: is it desirable that the meaning of humanitarianism becomes just as rigid as the definition of a refugee, or is it preferable that it remains open to interpretation, like development is? Further research is necessary to answer these questions.

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