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# The Science(s) of Humanitarian Studies

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## **Abstract**

Is there a science – if not sciences - of humanitarian studies? Taking the institutionalization of this particular area as indicator, humanitarian studies are definitely a scientific enterprise. The question therefore is not whether humanitarian studies have that status but rather what the specifics of this particular area of research are. Are the studies contributing to theory development? Do they contribute to the growth of empirical insights? This paper will address these two critical issues. Humanitarian studies have their origin in the normative if not moral preoccupation, to put it in the words of the founder of the humanitarian movement, Henri Dunant, to humanize war. The concern with human suffering has certainly strongly motivated analysts (both scholars and practitioners) to study humanitarian action. Another motive has certainly been the issue as how to improve the overall functioning of the humanitarian system in general, humanitarian action in particular. The primary concern of this paper is a first even though preliminary assessment of the state of the art in humanitarian studies. The interest in this topic can be resumed with two specific questions: first, do we know why agencies behave the way they do and how they adapt to the ever-changing context? Second what are the conditions that determine the dynamics of the international humanitarian system?. A few suggestions will be made how to make this particular field more relevant from a theoretical perspective.

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## 1. Introduction: what is scientific?

Is there a science of humanitarian studies? The argument is straightforward: the answer is yes if a particular field of study is recognized as relevant both by scholars and by practitioners. The central criterion is therefore whether humanitarian studies are institutionalized in the academic world and in politics. We will do so with the limited perspective of an International Relations scholar by arguing that normative concerns have been and still are a strong determinant for analyzing humanitarian action. The reason is that humanitarian action is embedded in the normative framework of international humanitarian law. We will then present a few (more or less) speculative arguments about the theoretical status of humanitarian studies before addressing the issue of the empirical achievements (again: the arguments can only be conjectural). Finally we will make some suggestions concerning the future research agenda for humanitarian studies.

One of the standard questions addressed to students when presenting their research project is „what’s your hypothesis?“ Scholars prefer to present their research as being embedded more or less explicitly in some kind of theory. Reference to theory differentiates the scientific domain from any other i. e. the nonscientific approaches such as journalism for example<sup>1</sup>. As the title I was given for this paper indicates, there could be more than a theory but rather many theories. This in turn suggests that humanitarian action can be analyzed by relying on the various disciplines in the social sciences, i.e. sociology of organizations, international relations, anthropology etc. but also medicine or public health. In other words, humanitarian action can be theoretically embedded in many of the different disciplines of the social sciences and others as well.

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<sup>1</sup> This should by no means imply a value judgement in the sense that anything non scientific is intellectually of second order, uninteresting or even irrelevant.

One could argue as well that humanitarian studies are a theoretical field in its own right that does not need to rely on existing disciplines. I could therefore be considered as a science from the moment on where it has become institutionalized within both academia and in politics. Is it taught in universities by professors? The answer is yes. Are there graduate programs in the universities awarding a degree in humanitarian studies? Again the answer is yes<sup>2</sup>. Are there scientific journals offering publication outlets? Yes, there are. Is it recognized as a relevant political issue area? Again, the answer is positive because there think tanks exist combining both scientific research with relevant policy issues. Finally, is it recognized as an important part of government policies and politics? This is the case: desks if not departments of humanitarian action have been institutionalized in many governments including more or less substantial budgets.

The fact remains that as a specific issue area humanitarian studies are relatively young . Quite typical for the emergence of new topics in social science research, humanitarian studies were the reaction to the new realities of conflict and natural disasters. There has been the exponential growth of the number of humanitarian actors and the resources allocated by the governments including the voluntary contributions by the citizens in the past decades. Contrary to the prediction of the “end of history” hoped for after the end of the Cold War the new reality was more something like back to the past but under new conditions: the starting point of humanitarian action initiated by Henri Dunant and his concern with the humanization of armed conflict. The problem is, as David Rieff (2003) observed, that never have there been so many norms and never worst realities.

Humanitarian studies as field of study compares probably quite well with the creation of Peace Research in Europe in the early nineteen seventies. The creation of Peace Research was

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<sup>2</sup> In France, for example, there are many Master Programs in humanitarian action, according to my information – even though not cross-checked – more than 50!

grounded on the concern with violent conflict and how to avoid it. Whereas the normative preoccupation with violence is still there, this research domain has finally reintegrated the existing disciplines (international relations, comparative politics etc.) with their varied methodologies. This is equivalent to what I would call the process of general theory awareness. At the same time real world developments also led to the enlargement of the research agenda. The democratic peace proposition, largely ignored throughout most of the Cold War period, attracted more and more scholars. The number of studies has virtually exploded since then<sup>3</sup>. In general there has been an evolution from the normative preoccupation (what ought to be done) to the informative dimension (why events happen) of this particular field of study.

The same situation seems to apply to humanitarian studies. Not only has the topic attracted an increasing number of scholars but at the same time the research agenda has soon started to grow, an end not being in sight due to the real world developments: the shift from interstate wars to internal wars, the combination of natural disasters with armed conflicts, the long duration of armed conflicts, and the reform processes at the international level, to mention but a few elements. The question therefore is where do we stand today? Are humanitarian studies reintegrating specific disciplines with their specific theoretical perspectives as peace research? To assess the state of the science(s) of humanitarian studies presupposes in principle a systematic review of the many studies published over the years, evaluate the theoretical and empirical achievements. For a short paper like this and the time available a comprehensive overview of this particular field of studies is impossible.

We have limited ourselves to discuss a number of specific issues complemented with a few illustrative cases. This will help to answer the following questions: is that research theoretically informed? Is it increasing our knowledge about reality of humanitarian action? Is it relevant for practice? For the further development of this particular research area it is time to

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<sup>3</sup> See the website: [www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/BIBLIO.HTML](http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/BIBLIO.HTML) accessed January, 2009

take a more distanced look at past achievements while at the same time looking ahead into the future. We therefore run the risk of simplification and generalization but this is the price to pay.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

There are many different vantage points to assess the evolution of the sciences of humanitarian action. One could, for example focus on the medical aspect of humanitarian action. Yet as we suggested above our perspective is related to the political dimension of humanitarian action. Before going into the details a basic difficulty humanitarian studies in general are confronted with needs to be mentioned. In a recent meeting bringing together the CEOs and presidents of the major french humanitarian NGOs one participant made the suggestion that the term “humanitarian” should be dropped altogether. The reason is that the label humanitarian is often used indiscriminantly therefore making it difficult for humanitarian studies to demarcate themselves (i.e; activities related to issues of international solidarity or development, activities related to armed conflicts as opposed to interventions in natural disaster, and so on). This suggestion refers to a core issue in the study of humanitarian action according to a first –even though provisional - proposition.

**Proposition (1):** the theoretical claim of humanitarian studies is taken for granted, how to develop solid theoretical foundations of this issue area has thus far not been given the necessary attention

The term humanitarian has become common currency attached to any envisage activity intended to support people in need of help: victims of war, homeless people, soldiers intervening in armed conflicts, poor people in developing countries etc. In addition the

dividing line between humanitarian action in the narrow sense in natural disasters and armed conflicts is often not clear. In the first case we are dealing with principles based on international humanitarian law, in the second case that normative framework relevant to the humanitarian organizations is absent. In simple terms, the sovereignty principle takes precedence which means that politics are in control of humanitarian action. What complicates matters further are the changes that occurred in reality: the shift from interstate to intra-state wars, the long duration of armed conflicts and the combination of armed conflict and natural disasters. In other words, I am not convinced that we properly specify the problems of humanitarian action.

Referring to theory, the starting point is the proper conceptualization. One could therefore argue that humanitarian NGOs in the context of international humanitarian law, which I have described as the attempt to establish a partial international order determined by international humanitarian law, play a role as civil society actors in the establishment of what is commonly described as a system of international governance. Humanitarian actors are part of the world of NGOs. One could simply assume that humanitarian NGOs are different from all the others. But one can also consider them as part of the world of NGOs at large involved in the building of a global governance structure and their contribution to other partial international orders. The problem here is that we neither have a general typology of the various types of NGOs in general, nor of the humanitarian NGOs in particular. The typology proposed by Risse (1995), for example is clearly incomplete: advocacy organizations, for-profit actors, and epistemic groups. Those that are operative are obviously ignored. Weiss and Gordenker (1996) speak of advocacy and educational NGOs. Again, this is an incomplete typology prematurely closing the domain for research. Within humanitarian studies the situation is similar. There have been several attempts of which I will mention only a few: the one by (2002) using the Dunant-Nansen reference. More sophisticated is the typology

developed by Schloms (2004) differentiating between extrovert, introvert or victim centred. This classification turned out to be useful to explain the decision of a number of NGOs whether to stay in North Korea or whether to withdraw. More recently Dijkzeul and Moke (2005:676) have developed what they call a mental map to classify humanitarian organizations in order to assess their different public communication strategies. These cases show how fruitful classifications are.<sup>4</sup>

Equally problematic is the absence of a specific type of humanitarian organization: the faith type based. As Ferris (2005:325) argues, “... they have the potential to play a powerful role in advocacy and public awareness.” The question is whether they do and why. Equally lacking is the systematic research on Islamic humanitarian organizations (Benthall/Belliot-Jourdan, 2003; de Cordier, 2008). That these organizations are relevant is beyond doubt. Yet they are not a relevant focus of theorizing nor empirical research.

A relatively broad conceptualization of humanitarian action linked to the particular issue of norm diffusion and implementation has been suggested by Eberwein (2004) even though never elaborated further systematically. He uses the concept of humanitarian system with its constitutive actors and linkages. Another theoretically relevant focus for humanitarian NGOs on the one hand, the NGO at large on the other, is also lacking proper theorizing. Eberwein/Saurugger (2009) have just begun their research on this topic and the potential impact this trend has for the future of NGOs.<sup>5</sup> Relevant in this context is another strand of research underway pursued by Schemeil (2008) on the notion of interorganizational coordination and cooperation. This issue includes as well the concept of networking, another issue awaiting greater theoretical elaboration (ODI, 2008a). The work by Dijkzeul and

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<sup>4</sup> There has been a publication by Caritas, if I am not misled, stating that it is not an NGO

<sup>5</sup> Professionalization may, among other things, lead to subcontracting in combination with the increasing competition of NGOs that may threaten their survival.



Gordenker (2003) goes in this direction by focussing on the intra- and inter-organizational relationship between what he calls the strategic arena and the implementing arena of organizations. This could in effect lead to a better understanding if not explanation of the survival strategies of international governmental and nongovernmental organizations. That the competition among NGOs as principals is a core factor has been shown by Cooley and Ron (2002). Using a political economy approach they focus on the principal-agent theorem with respect to donors (the states as principals) and recipients of grants (IGOs and NGOs as agents). One of the main theoretical arguments is that performance will necessarily be suboptimal. These studies illustrate the potential for the analysis of humanitarian action based on an explicit theoretically informed approach.

This, evidently, is not made easier due to the fact that the humanitarian system itself is constantly changing. Stockton's (2003) review of the development of international humanitarian action over the last decades is revealing in that respect. In other words, the permanently new arising problems of humanitarian action tend to enlarge the research themes rather than the deepening of the theoretical reflection. This is the result of the ongoing process of institutionalization of humanitarian action as an issue area.

### **3. The Empirical Dimension**

At this stage, concrete problems humanitarian action is faced with seem to dominate the research agenda (civil-military relations, conflict management and resolution, the linkage with development, UN reform). Interesting is that a large part of the research is concentrated in a few places, where the Overseas Development Institute with its Humanitarian Policy Group

and the Feinstein International Center may be considered as “lead agencies” given the quantity and quality of their output.

Proposition (2): Empirical research is mainly driven by the various problems and issues as they emerge. Research is predominantly using the case study approach and its policy affinity.

The difficulty to assess at least the plausibility of this assumption is obvious. For the present propose the decision was made to use the list of publications by two of the prominent research institutions in the field: the Humanitarian Policy Group publications of the Overseas Development Institute and the Feinstein International Center. In the first case we took the list of reports<sup>6</sup> and in the second we used the list of HPG Reports. In the latter case we did not distinguish between commissioned reports and non commissioned reports even though this may bias to some extent the results in that they may primarily address concrete issues and not general problems. This, however, is not generally true.

For a first rough classification we used the following categories: *general studies* (focusing on a particular issue such as “Mapping the risk of corruption”, HPG Report, 2008a); *case studies* focusing on a particular issue in a particular country (i.e. HPG Report 2006); *comparative studies* which analyse one issue comparatively (i.e. HPG Report, 2003); and finally what one can label as *practical studies* (i.e. HPG Report, 2008b) which includes studies focusing on policy issues.<sup>7</sup> The results are displayed in table 1.

### **Table 1**

The Humanitarian Policy Group and the Feinstein International Center Publications  
compared

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<sup>6</sup> The Internet was accessed on January 15, 2009

<sup>7</sup> We have also reviewed the articles published between 2005 and 2008 in the International Review of the Red Cross. The bulk of the articles are mostly theme oriented (i.e. Terrorism, Sanctions, catastrophic events etc.) and more general with a strong link to international humanitarian law.

	General	Comparative	Case Studies	Practical	N of Cases
FIC	5	2	35	3	45
ODI/HPG	21	5	4	16	46

A first remark seems to be in order. The practical studies and the case studies are not fundamentally different in that the case studies often include a policy/practical dimension. This being said, there is a noticeable difference between these two institutions in that HPG obviously produces more analyses concerning more general issues than the Feinstein Center, the latter clearly closer to what one could call a policy orientation. This is not to say that the bulk of the studies is deficient from an analytical point of view. This is definitely not the case. There is, however, a mutually reinforcing link between the case study approach and the belief that each humanitarian emergency differs from the other. The case study shows that each situation (i.e. Sudan, the DRC etc.) is in fact specific. And because of their specificity, it is difficult if not impossible to generalize.

From a methodological point of view the case study approach is legitimate, necessary and useful (cf. George/Bennett, 2005). Yet as Tarrow (2004) has shown the combination of qualitative (i.e. case studies) and quantitative studies (in search of generalizations), do not exclude each other but instead provide complementary insights. The absence of a (quantitative) data base in the field of humanitarian studies is striking.<sup>8</sup> And if this is the case as the work by Olson et al. (2003) shows, the research design and the indicators used are not convincing if not questionable.<sup>9</sup> The same could be said for the case studies Cooley and Ron (2002) include to support their theoretical arguments. Their selection of the cases is problematic thereby precluding any generalization.

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<sup>8</sup> An exception is the dated book by Boli and Thomas, 1999

<sup>9</sup> The data do not allow for generalizations. Among others the level of aggregation is not adequate

Research in the area of humanitarian studies over the past two decades or so has definitely contributed to increase considerably our insights into the various aspects of humanitarian action. In that sense, one can definitely argue that there is a science of humanitarian studies.

### **3. The practical dimension**

The research agenda has been, and still is, determined to a large extent by the problems encountered in the real world. To formulate a third proposition:

**Proposition (3):** The strong linkage between theory and practice has turned out to be important yet at the same time representing a potential barrier to more distanced theoretically grounded research.

That research and practice are relatively closely interlinked is an asset of this particular issue area. A number of prominent scholars in the field are simultaneously active as consultants in the growing number of evaluation studies. The advantage is their access to information an independent scholar can usually only get with difficulties. This might explain the affinity to the many policy problems humanitarian action is confronted with. There are, however some drawbacks. Policy studies are certainly valuable but they tend to bias the analysis towards practical solutions. It seems that a systematic analysis of strategic issues such as the different cultures or origin of the various humanitarian organizations does not range too high on the research agenda. Dijkzeul and Moke (2005:687) for example speak of the difference between US and European NGOs. Our guess is that there is nothing like a homogenous European NGO type. The variation within and across European states (take France, the UK, Germany and the Scandinavian countries) is probably very high, both in terms of their specific

understanding of humanitarian action as well as with respect to their relation with the state and the military.

This policy orientation has at the same time had a beneficial effect both for practice and research in that numerous issues have been taken up that are undeniably relevant. One could mention the politicization of humanitarian action with NGOs being the hostages of politics. Another issue relates to the relation between humanitarians and soldiers. Or, to mention a third topic, there is the whole problem of evaluation.<sup>10</sup> in combination with the professionalization of the humanitarian sector and their academic “fellow travellers” this indicates a considerable learning capacity. Most recently the issue of accountability, corruption and impact have emerged.

#### **4. Outlook – Where should we go?**

The author’s bias should have become evident by now: a bias for greater investment in theorizing. Theorizing is not conceived as a self serving demand of a scholar. What we mean by more theorizing is in the first place the identification of a research agenda including some core problems from a particular general disciplinary perspective that need to be attacked. This means clarifying what needs to be explained and the means required for that purpose.

Beginning with what we call the means for humanitarian studies to further progress, a broad data base on the actors and their activities needs to be developed. We will just refer to a few of the data needed, the list being anything but exhaustive. But one does not have to reinvent the wheel as good data sets, both for conflict (i.e. COW and UCDP) and natural disasters (CRED) for example are available. They are regularly updated. Such time series for

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<sup>10</sup> It might be worthwhile to analyze in greater depth the annual meta evaluations by ALNAP. As these reports indicate, quite a number of evaluations do not live up to the required standards.

humanitarian organizations are badly missing. Corresponding time series for the OECD-DAC government expenditures are available but neither easily available. For the normative dimension events data on UN resolutions, government declarations concerning the respect of international humanitarian law might also be useful but missing. In other words, there is a lot of raw material disposable, but craftsmanship is missing to make it ready for consumption.

Turning to the theoretical dimension the strategy suggested would not consist in interpreting humanitarian action in the framework of one of the existing paradigms in international relations, for example. Rather the strategy suggested consists in identifying a number of central problems before developing relevant hypotheses drawing upon existing theories. For that purpose we will draw upon the report published by the Feinstein Center (Donini et al. 2008) on the State of the Humanitarian Enterprise. This report is focusing on the “Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Final Report”. Given the prominence of this institution, we proceed on the assumption that their report sets priorities for the humanitarian research agenda.

The authors conceptualize the problems of humanitarian action in terms of four petals of a wilting flower: Universality, Terrorism/Counter-Terrorism, Coherence, and Security. Universality, coherence and security are central. Whether terrorism will retain its prominence on the political agenda with the end of the Bush administration and the new Obama presidency is open. From our point of view that aspect is part of the security agenda. Universality, coherence and security, in contrast, relate to the fundamental problems of the humanitarian system at large, humanitarian action particularly. In combination with the last chapter of that report, *HA2075 and Beyond: Emerging Issues*, we have a fairly comprehensive overview of the political and research agenda. The problem is that both agendas need to be

dissociated to from one another. To elaborate this statement we suggest the following proposition which is an extension of proposition 3:

**Proposition (4):** Research has to move beyond diagnosis and the focus on how to improve humanitarian action to explanatory models of the functioning of both individual agencies and the humanitarian system at large and its transformation through adaptation.

Most of the scholars writing about humanitarian action thus contributing to the overall field of humanitarian studies, do so – as we assume – because of their belief in the value of humanitarian action (more particular emergency relief). There are certainly some who are probably much more cynical about it considering that kind of approach as utterly idealistic and unrealistic. On the political side of the agenda diagnosis may indeed contribute to determine adaptation strategies in an incremental fashion. Specific problems are identified which then are found on the agenda of both donors and NGOs. Examples are codes of conduct, SPHERE standards, evaluation, the gender issue, accountability and more recently coordination, to mention but a few of the themes. These originate in part on the donor side, but a number of initiatives clearly come from the NGO themselves. Incrementalism is the result<sup>11</sup>. The core issue though is how the various actors adapt individually and what the outcome is for the humanitarian system at large. The individual adaptation strategies of the humanitarian organizations do not necessarily add up to the overall improvement of the humanitarian system at large. This may possibly be the case in terms of the performance of the humanitarian actors but not necessarily be the humanitarian system at large retaining its distance from political interference and functioning according both the humanitarian principles and the principles of humanitarian action (cf. Leader, 1998).

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<sup>11</sup> A good example of this is the suggestion by the Feinstein report (2008: 29) for the creation of a Humanitarian Council of the UN. It is unlikely that this would change the state of affairs fundamentally, as the Human Rights Council shows;

Getting back to the agenda 2015 the various problems enumerated can be subdivided into two classes: contextual factors or conditions that relate to the political environment of humanitarian emergencies on the one hand, the internal factors relating to the functioning of the humanitarian system itself. In contrast probably to other issue areas where NGOs are active, the humanitarian domain differs from many others given the large proportion of them being operational in delivering aid. Unless private funding becomes the dominant source of income the consequence is that the donors, the states, can determine to a large extent not only whom they finance but also the conditions for their operations. In other words, the core issue to be explained is why states decide to invest considerable resources for humanitarian relief. We cannot assume that the justification for financing humanitarian action and actual financing is stationary.

What determines change over time? This issue is related to the changing power structure and competition in the international system. One standard explanation that has been offered is that states substitute their reluctance to intervene politically if not militarily in ongoing conflicts with the humanitarian band aid. If however the conflicts take place in areas considered to be of strategic relevance (raw materials etc.) the reverse is true, that is they will intervene and also intend to use humanitarian aid for “mind and soul” winning purposes. In both cases there is a tendency to instrumentalize the humanitarian agencies. Some of them even support such political objectives. If, furthermore power competition increases this will further undermine the notion of humanitarian principles and the principles of humanitarian action. We thus would postulate that as in other issue areas, in particular development policies, the chances for principled humanitarian action are largely dependent on these external developments. New donors are appearing in this domain and it is likely that this will affect the humanitarian system at large. According to Gleditsch (2008: 702) the proportion of Islamic conflicts has increased since 1990. By 2006 that proportion is around 35 percent.



Given the presumed money disbursed by Islamic donors and in the context of the present conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq in particular, the Israeli-Palestine conflict and the Iran problem, it is likely that this will introduce an additional dimension of political competition thereby adding additional constraints on humanitarian action in the near future. The issue of so-called Western dominance may possibly turn into a competition between Western and non-Western competition.

As a starting point for potential explanations one might use the organized hypocrisy hypothesis Krasner (1999) has formulated with respect to sovereignty. This hypocrisy assumption may be explored for a more general explanation by including other issue areas such as human rights. Interesting in this context is the political economy approach by Berkovitch and Gordon (2008) that relate donor funding to their political agendas in the domain of human rights. From a comparative perspective it would be more than necessary to assess the coherence (of incoherence) of government funding bilaterally and multilaterally across various domains.

Financing life saving operations is one aspect, another one is coherence with respect to the norms imposed by international humanitarian law. This relates to the engagement of the states in general, donor states in particular, for the respect of international humanitarian law (probably an interesting research topic for those favouring discourse analysis). It might be worthwhile to take a more distanced position and raise the issue why states behave the way they do, whether and how their behavior changes over time, and how this affects the overall political context of humanitarian action.

Conditionality, to use that term, requiring the respect for the norms enshrined in the codes of conduct by the donors links up with the actual functioning of emergency relief aid on

reality. Let us assume for a moment that the humanitarian system in general, the humanitarian organizations in particular, are not subject to the external factors. That they are all committed to the principles of humanitarian action. There is one core condition for the likelihood that all the humanitarian actors will respect and actually work according to the principles of humanitarian action (humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality): the homogeneity of the operative humanitarian organizations. This is obviously not the case. Each organization defines more or less autonomously its own mission including other functions (peace, human rights, development etc.).

There are at least two commonalities all these actors share independently of their different concepts of principled humanitarian action: professionalization and resource needs. Both are central in determining the adaptation process of the agencies populating the humanitarian ground. Professionalization is a precondition for the individual organization to improve its performance. A good professional performance record in turn is a necessary condition in the successful competition for resources. Theoretically, these remarks open the window of opportunity for systematic research with respect not only to the problem of organizational adaptation and learning (if one wishes) but also with respect to inter-organizational relations. The latter refer among others to the problem of coordination within and between organizations. Structurally the open question is how these two sets of factors in combination with the observable evolution towards a kind of oligopoly structure of this particular market will affect both humanitarian principles and principles of humanitarian action. Under what conditions is the humanitarian system more likely to become more and more similar to a specific production sector, where the performance of service delivery determines the survival if not growth of a given organization? And which conditions are more likely to reinforce a humanitarian system that is much more operating along the fundamental principles of humanitarian action?

These are but a few remarks relating to the need for the better theoretical foundations of problem oriented studies or a problem oriented science of humanitarian studies. A number of these are outlined in the Feinstein International Center Report mentioned above.

Whether our ideas about greater theory driven approaches to the study of humanitarian action are just an irrelevant ivory tower reflections of a scholar or a promising extension of extant research remains to be seen.

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