World society and field theory: The infiltration of development into humanitarianism

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Funding information
This research was supported by a College of Liberal Arts Graduate Research Partnership Program Fellowship, University of Minnesota

Abstract
Differentiated modern society is commonly viewed as an aggregation of various fields, yet the question of their boundaries is often a silent one. This article builds on this lacuna to argue that cultural globalization should be acknowledged and added to the equation. Drawing from two distinct branches of the sociology of knowledge, Bourdieusian field theory and Meyer's world society, an integrative approach is presented here. It rests on three propositions: scriptwriting is related to fields; script may be diffused into other fields; and a global taken for granted can emerge. With an eye toward the humanitarian-development nexus, the article examines the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (established in 1950). Utilizing archival materials, changes the organization underwent, and the transfer of knowledge from the development field are documented. The article argues that resistance to the diffusion of social knowledge may occur, but some shared understanding is nonetheless gained.

KEYWORDS
development, diffusion, field theory, humanitarianism, world society
INTRODUCTION

Just a few weeks prior to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), Doctors Without Borders (MSF) dramatically pulled out. Arguing that “the summit has become a fig-leaf of good intentions,” in its statement MSF (2016) primarily opposed the “incorporation of humanitarian assistance into a broader development and resilience agenda.” These words disclose the dominancy of a differentiation perspective that understands humanitarianism and development as distinct fields. Admittedly, each has its own genealogy, temporality, and objectives. Cultural heritage and ethos prevail, primarily the reduction of suffering for the former and the elevation of poverty for the latter. Yet, as the following shows, the boundaries are both slippery and contested.

In recent decades new forms of intervention, combining development, humanitarianism, and state-building (Dunn, 2012) have been expanding. Researchers documented the effect of local (Sande Lie, 2017) and international (Gabiam, 2012) politics on the transformation of humanitarian action into development aid. In fact, the humanitarian-development nexus received formal acknowledgment by UN resolution 46/182 (1991). For humanitarians, however, this is a highly contentious topic. Drawing strong symbolic boundaries, practitioners fearing the politicization of the humanitarian environment have negatively dubbed this shift as “new humanitarianism” (Fox, 2001). But does the intrusion of development knowledge to the humanitarian field truly form a novelty? How should we interpret these knowledge dynamics?

Using the case of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this article shows that such blurring of boundaries is not a new occurrence. Founded in 1950 to mitigate the European refugee problem following World War II, today UNHCR is among the largest humanitarian organizations, and is deeply rooted within the humanitarian field. As such, it is influenced by the logic of the field and can be expected to follow it. Tracing historical shifts of the organization since its establishment, I examine the gradual extension of development knowledge into the UNHCR, conceptualized as the first (1960s) and second (1980s) stages of development. Important earlier work emphasized the split nature of humanitarianism (Barnett, 2011) or applied field theory to account for agents’ tendency to safeguard their field from external influences (Krause, 2014; Savelsberg, 2015). But these approaches often hold humanitarianism to be static and fail to address the unraveling of change.

Addressing this gap, I suggest an approach that draws on two levels. From a meso perspective, the overlooked issue of change and transformation of fields’ boundaries (Gorski, 2013; Liu, 2021) serves as one conceptual leg. From a macro position, I adapt world society theory (Meyer et al., 1997) to illuminate knowledge institutionalization, which engenders the second part of the argument. I suggest that changes within UNHCR do not transpire in isolation. Rather, they are influenced by the global diffusion of “social knowledge” (Camic, Gross and Lamont, 2011, pp. 3–4). Yet, the latter is not a sweeping surge, and dissidence is evident. Therefore, acknowledging and addressing this tension enriches the world society perspective in cases of contingent diffusion (Pope and Meyer, 2016).

To document these meso-macro knowledge dynamics (Savelsberg, 1994), I conduct a historical ethnography on UNHCR archival materials. My investigation focuses upon patterns of intrusion of external segments of social knowledge that originated from the field of development. First, relevant literature on field theory and world society theory will be reviewed separately. Next, I propose an integrative approach to examine the ties between fields and scripts and the question of a field’s purity vis-à-vis the effects of global culture. Before moving to the empirical case, I provide a brief overview of development and humanitarianism. The analysis reveals that recent conflicts over the interlacing of knowledge from two fields are not the first. Since the 1960s, and explicitly during the 1980s, development-driven knowledge found its way into the core of UNHCR and its humanitarian activity. With their partial-adaptation-partial-rejection, these waves left a mark. Thus, instead of asking what the points of distinction are, as a differentiated perspective would dictate, I investigate similarities. Doing so benefits world society theory by integrating meso processes to explain resistance and variations, while contributing to field theory by conceptualizing the exchange of knowledge as a path toward change.
2 THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Thinking integratively

The basic empirical puzzle probes the question: Why does the humanitarian-development nexus keep resurfacing as a novelty? Humanitarians, after all, may simply embrace development practices and integrate them into their work. Yet why are they pushing back, and why would they do so again and again?

The general sociological issue of fields’ autonomy explains part of their rejection. From a Bourdieusian perspective, agents attempting to limit access and maintain “a monopoly” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 100) over their field’s capital are wary of external influences regarded as “pollution” (Krause, 2014; Savelsberg, 2015). To an extreme, Bourdieu (2005, p. 40) proposes that “falling into undifferentiatedness … means losing existence.” Notably, this rebuff can initiate change. With the death of a field being a radical possibility, even if an external unwanted influence is blocked (Bourdieu, 1988, 2005), some internal movements could be eventuated.

The issue of autonomy signifies that fields do not stand in isolation. Whereas relations between fields form a “blind spot” (Liu, 2021) in Bourdieu’s theory, a close reading shows that the multiplicity of fields and levels, and the transfer of social knowledge and practice across them (Camic, 2013), are drivers of change. Specifically, their boundaries are prone to change, that is, leakage or expansion of one field into another (Gorski, 2013). 1 Perhaps the empirical question is an issue of ongoing engagement between humanitarians and development personal, representatives of two different fields that became connected. This cross-boundary alliance, however, is highly contested (Krause, 2014; Savelsberg, 2015), and agents often oppose it for the aforementioned reasons. It also implies a more direct interaction, along with the notion that a concrete policy had been exchanged (in the style envisioned by political scientists; e.g., Volden et al., 2008), which was not necessarily the case. An alternative approach can be the broader circulation of ideas. From field theory perspective, ideas may circulate, losing their original context as they travel, to be re-interpreted according to the field of reception (Bourdieu, 1999). Field theory pays little attention, however, to the conditions of ideas’ actual circulation, the mechanisms of globalization.

A theoretical program that directly addresses the global dynamics of ideas and norms is world society theory. This perspective views world society as an expanded and decentralized institutional order on a global scale with multiple actors and levels (Boyle, 2002; Drori et al., 2003; Meyer et al., 1997). In terms of its structure, it is comprised mainly of numerous organizations, treaties, policies, and epistemic communities of professionals and specialists (Hironaka, 2014; Meyer, 2010). The focus is on cultural meanings of institutions—such as the modern legal system (Boyle & Meyer, 1998), rationalization (Meyer et al., 1987), and capitalism (Jepperson & Meyer, 2007)—and their worldwide dissemination.

World society theorists argue for an institutional structuration that influences the full spectrum of the social, leading to highly structured actors—states (Meyer et al., 1997), formal organizations (Meyer & Bromley, 2013), and individuals (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000)—through the spread of ready-made institutional scripts or models. Hence, global culture offers guidance to actors on “how to do the correct things” (Meyer, 2009, p. 50) for a wide range of issues. In effect, and not without variation, the result is a world “filled with shared understandings of nature, humans, and society” (Meyer, 2009, p. 37).

World society theorists also study encounters and negotiations over global norms (Boyle et al., 2015; Pope & Meyer, 2016). Adding to this body of scholarship and similar to Wimmer (2021), I engage with the cultural particularities that affect the ongoing adaptation and rejection of scripted knowledge in the case of contingent diffusion, which is “conditioned by characteristics of the local setting itself” (Pope & Meyer, 2016, p. 293).

To formulate the issue differently, I am interested in the institutionalization of culture upon its variations. Whereas the recently introduced domains theory is highly complex, as Wimmer (2021) justly acknowledged, I too suggest thinking integratively, while limiting my view. Alongside the transnational, the nation-state, and the level of individuals (the three common levels that world society theory refers to), I propose that fields should be
included. This will enrich the study of global knowledge and field dynamics. Moreover, it will provide a more accurate account of the structure of world society and the conditions leading to varying reception of global culture.

A brief genealogy of neo-institutionalism, world society, and their relations to Bourdieu’s work helps to explain my positionality. The neo in neo-institutionalism was prompted by Meyer and his collaborators since the 1970s (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977; for a review see Jepperson, 2002), with a focus on the institutional forces at hand, mainly in formal organizations. In its early renascence, it was assumed that institutions are positioned within a uniformed environment, which led to the concepts of “societal sectors” (Scott & Meyer, 1991) and “organizational fields” (DiMaggio, 1991). Indeed, calls to re-incorporate culture (Friedland & Alford, 1991) contributed to a more diversified view that seeks to be attentive to variations and the interplay between contesting social forces and institutions. Thus, the turn to field-level conceptualization served to posit organizational analysis as relational (Scott, 2008). In this respect, it has embraced a similar relational spirit as did Bourdieu. Likewise, the concept of institutional logic emerged, in conversation with Bourdieu’s logic of practice (Friedland, 2009).

The point to be made is that since the early 1990s, this body of work branched into organizational institutionalism (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2008) and sociological institutionalism (Meyer, 2009). The latter’s phenomenological take on institutions holds a broad understanding of culture and explains the ways institutions construct society: the rise of the nation-state, of organizations, and of individuals. Put differently, it evolved into the study of world society, the theoretical conglomerate this article fits within.

Here, engagements with Bourdieu’s theory are nearly in absentia. When Wang (2016) juxtaposed neo-institutionalism with field theory, comparing how these two theories tackle the issue of structure and similarity, the reference was to the more organizational stream of the theory. World society scholars themselves have turned away from the “organizational field” concept, which was seen to hold “realist conceptions of the actor” (Meyer, 2010, p. 4). Early references to the way institutions live within actors via Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) were silenced. As the theory matured, it became possible to grasp the differentiation of social theory. Calls to investigate the two traditions together (Gorski, 2013) were largely unanswered (c.f., Ferguson, 2021).

Indeed, setting these two theoretical traditions into a conversation is nontrivial. For example, each emphasizes a different level of the social. Bourdieu’s theory often operates under a methodological nationalism standpoint, whereas world society is a cultural globalization theory par excellence. Relatedly, Bourdieusian field theory rests on a strongly differentiated viewpoint (Lahire, 2015), whereas world society theory argues that the contemporary world sees a rise in shared understandings.²

None the less, both theories share a common ontological stance. Whereas Bourdieu (1993) points to the structuring-structure dialectic quality of fields, world society theory emphasizes the structuring of actors according to their context (Meyer, 2010). It acknowledges the dialectic involved: in the long run, actors also create relations (Hwang et al., 2019). Hence, these theoretical research programmes are united by their shared objection to rational actor and functionalist approaches, while embracing the basic spirit of the sociology of knowledge and a constitutive stance.

In recent years, researchers who follow Bourdieu introduced the concept of global or transnational fields, to refer to social configurations that share similar logic and capital, while transcending national boundaries (Buchholz, 2016; Go & Krause, 2016). In this way, they call attention to specific arenas of relatively autonomous social activity. Thus, while traditionally the two theories were attentive to different levels, this gap seems more bridgeable today. Put together, when it comes to the essential way these theories understand the social world, a common dominator emerges. Bearing in mind that what I propose is not an all-encompassing “theoreticist theory” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 110)—that is, a theory for its own sake—I want to offer a few promising directions.

**Scripts and fields.** As scriptwriting “is a historical-cultural drama” (Meyer, 2009, p. 42), it is contextual. And even if loosely defined, fields are a primary source of social-contextualization, that is, of institutionalized knowledge (Savelsberg, 1994). Whereas intra-organizational scriptwriting was explained as the result of concrete interests (Kentikelenis & Seabrooke, 2017), it is also funneled by the roles and conditions of the fields in which it
is embedded (Lim, 2021). Even when conflicting frames prevent scripts from becoming institutionalized (Boyle et al., 2015), tracing their origins brings us back to specific fields. Therefore, scripts are written within fields and—given their bias toward homogeneity—they are prone to reflect orthodoxy over heterodoxy.

**Scripts that cross boundaries.** The norms and actions promoted by world society spread to states through the influence of altruistic “others” who have special legitimacy (Meyer, 2000), that is, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). By the same token, institutions operating at the transnational level are exposed to emerging models (Schofer et al., 2012), and to some degree, to domestic influences as well (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). World society also arrives at the individual level (via education, the media, and similar mechanisms), where these globally-circulated norms are been internalized (Hadler, 2017; Pierotti, 2013; Kim, 2020). Importantly, social change is achieved not by a single organization, treaty, or policy. As depicted in Hironaka’s (2014) Bee Swarm model, it is the cumulative effect of various factors operating at multiple levels that generate social change.3

Thinking via fields contributes yet another layer, as individuals and organizations are located within specific national and global fields.4 This implies that they are relevant not only in the stage of scriptwriting, but also in the process of reception. Individuals and organizations may internalize knowledge promoted by world society. Yet, different fields dictate their own logic and rules of the game. The result might be “play” and struggle over autonomy, which explains the rejection of external knowledge and the existence of contingent diffusion (Pope & Meyer, 2016).

That which is taken for granted. Alongside opposition, these global how-to-models can also be incorporated and turned into the doxa of a field: a Durkheimian “social fact” that becomes a non-verbal social blind spot, doxa marks the naturalization of the world and the ‘taken for granted’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164). As the aforementioned implies, such knowledge is not restricted to a single field, and can gain the status of “social ether” (Krücken & Drori, 2009, p. 19). Put differently, shared understandings can be established that are so widely accepted, they are seen as a global doxa (e.g., human rights which are no longer the sole business of law professionals, but rather become part of the basic worldview of much of humanity).

To conclude, an integrative perspective informs us that world society opens a new avenue to conceptualize the flow of knowledge across fields and the alternation of their boundaries. They are likely to be porous and reach further than ever before. This does not abolish contest altogether, but struggle and disagreement will be informed by a deep common culture. Moreover, such synergy allows us to incorporate the global cultural order into a solid analytical framework that is more meso in nature; it bears some resemblance to the notion of domains (Wimmer, 2021). Furthermore, thinking with fields helps to clarify agents’ opposition to specific elements of world society, adding further complexity to the actuality of diffusion. In what follows, I explore this possibility through the specific case of UNHCR and the fields of development and humanitarianism.

2.2 Understanding development

Before examining the gradual shift of UNHCR toward development, a few introductory words are in order. Most commonly, the era of development is associated with the launch of the Marshall Plan and Truman’s Point Four Program. It is seen as an American initiative, a call for the international community to unite and solve the problems of the “underdeveloped” regions of the world. Its social roots, however, are deeply ingrained in Western philosophy (Rist, 2008), colonialism (Hodge, 2016) and even Catholicism (Chamedes, 2015). Thus, far from being a manner of *sui generis*, development feeds on numerous social sources.

Starting in the mid-20th century, development took on the form of a *project* (McMichael, 2017). Thus, while more critical positions exist, a poverty-oriented and apolitical view was promoted and institutionalized worldwide by an assembly of IGOs and INGOs (Chabbott, 1999).5 This *project* of a transnational field (Viterna & Robertson, 2015) has undergone several shifts in orientation, as presented in Table 1. Namely, from placing the


| Key paradigm          | Marshall Plan and the post-WWII turn | Keynesian economy | Western model’s modernization | Basic-needs approach | Neoliberalism | Sustainable development and growth | Millennium development goals | Sustainable development goals |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Characteristics       | The birth of development.             | Economic growth.  | Economic growth and some attention to the rural poor and basic needs. A turn to education and agriculture. | Raising the poor into the economy. Social justice and equality. | “The lost decade.” Economic crisis. Structural adjustment programs. Smaller government and neoliberal reforms. | Good governance, empowerment, grassroots development. | Infrastructure and human capital as a path for economic growth. Capability approach. Refocus on extreme poverty. | Global world–global environment. Poverty as a problem we can solve. |

First development decades: Reducing poverty, yet placing the state at the front.

Turning to neoliberal globalization. From being oblivious to inequality to becoming a participant and empowered grassroots poverty reducer.
state at the front, since the late 1980s, communities and individuals were gradually emphasized. What remains rather stable is the construction of global poverty as a problem (Ziai, 2016). The developmental idealism (Thornton et al., 2015), a "taken for granted" cultural mode that speaks of progress, increased choice, and a transformative vision of society, also remained stable. This implies long-term action compelled by an ethic of social empowerment and transformation.

2.3 | A brief background of humanitarianism

Humanitarianism is complicated, with centuries-old social roots (Paulmann, 2013; Stamatov, 2013). It is driven by the desire to mitigate emergencies, save lives, and reduce the suffering of distant strangers (Barnett, 2011; Calhoun, 2008). It has both a cultural dimension and a material base (Hoffman & Weiss, 2018). The principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence fit the former and suffuse it with energy, meaning, and purpose. The moving assembly of the "humanitarian international" (de Waal, 1997) fits in with the latter.

Speaking in terms of a field, and given the orthodox position of the International Committee of the Red Cross, these four principles constitute its logic (Dromi, 2020). Its authority, or capital, is the alleviation of suffering (Wilson & Brown, 2009), and different organizations occupy positions according to their "purity and pollution" (Krause, 2014, p. 93). This was also referred to as "schizophrenic humanitarianism" (Hoffman & Weiss, 2018) where "alchemical" (developmental) and "emergency" humanitarianism co-exist (Barnett, 2011). While some organizations gravitate toward the question of "root causes," others align themselves more closely with the field’s core principles.

3 | DATA AND METHODS

In this article, I utilize a historical ethnography, "an attempt to elicit organizational structure and culture from documents" (Vaughan, 1996:61), of UNHCR archival materials. This approach, which I regard as both a method and a perspective (Blommaert, 2018), allows me to reconstruct UNHCR structure and culture, akin to Burawoy’s (2009) archeological revisit. I collected the materials at the organization’s archives in Geneva. The backbone of the investigation rests on UNHCR's week-long Executive Committee (ExCom) annual meetings with their associated documentation: opening statements, a summary record, and a summary report of the meetings, as well as supplementary documents that were presented to the committee. Available from the 1950s onward on a biennial basis, these provide a representation of the dynamics at the headquarters level.

The archival materials (approximately 10,000 pages) were imported into NVivo for thematic interpretation. Following the methodological directions outlined by Vaughan, the materials were coded in search of shifts in rhetoric, representation, forms of knowledge, and more. By accentuating references to humanitarianism (e.g., its four principles, the key work of UNHCR, and emergencies) and development (partnering, adaptation of objectives, long-term planning, and so forth), I analyzed the changing dynamics. Inspired by the Bee Swarm model of social change (Hironaka, 2014), I am drawn to microseismic activity. Finally, I do not engage in an all-encompassing field analysis (see Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). Rather, a sociology of knowledge reading of Bourdieu’s theory informs that fields constitute culture and knowledge. As UNHCR was structured by its field, I attempt to shed light on the transformations that occurred in the organization, and to extrapolate from them on to the humanitarian field. Thus, I adopt elements from world society theory combined with field-inspired thinking, so as to reflect upon the subsistence of development knowledge within the humanitarian field.
A close examination of UNHCR uncovers several positions and their associated logic. Each has grown and been transformed at different times, responding to changing needs and situations. To begin chronologically, international protection is the first mission of the organization, resting at the core of its mandate. Then there is relief, which encompasses material assistance, emergency response, and the general wellbeing and welfare of refugees. Lastly, a frequently overlooked position reflects the general idea of development.

4.1 International protection meets relief

UNHCR, as its 1950 mandate suggests, “shall assume the function of providing international protection … and of seeking permanent solutions for the problem of refugees.” The first section is viewed as the basic target of the organization. According to August Lindt, the High Commissioner at the time, the objective of legal international protection was “to overcome the legal disabilities from which refugees suffer owing to their lack of national protection, and safeguarding their rights and legitimate interests.”

To that end, an international endeavor was inaugurated. The organization encouraged states to ratify international instruments such as the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. Serving as a catalyst, UNHCR worked with governments to promote the legal architecture of the international refugee law. On another level, the organization was involved in cases where refugees were present, ready to cooperate with governments and civil society to legally ensure their safeguard.

The second mandated objective of UNHCR is the promotion of permanent solutions for refugees. With European refugees in mind, the ideal solution was repatriation. When this was conceived impossible, then integration and resettlement were the next best option. Here, the physical and social sides of displacements were considered. Specifically, UNHCR’s first mission was collaborating with governments to vacate the refugee camps and temporary settlements across Europe. Before this objective had been fully reached, the “Hungarian Refugee Problem” emerged in 1956, with tens of thousands seeking shelter in other European countries. UNHCR was quick to respond, calling governments to act humanely and to take in refugees by quotas.

During the 1960s, relief gradually entered the inner workings of UNHCR, which endorsed other organizations to step in and care for the urgent needs of refugees. With the influx of refugees from Algeria to Tunisia and Morocco, UNHCR supported Red Cross societies to distribute relief. This was a fundamental break from the geographical focal point of UNHCR that was defined by its mandate, Europe. The Good Office policy, a series of General Assembly resolutions that were institutionalized, paved the way for UNHCR to engage with refugee situations elsewhere (Betts et al., 2012).

This global expansion accelerated and was accompanied by a dichotomized rhetoric, distinguishing between “old [European] refugees” and “new refugees.” Regarding the latter, many within the organization clung to the view that “quick action and the provision of material assistance” was required. Thus, alongside legal protection, growing attention was devoted to aid. Here, financial expenditure is a useful indicator for gleaning additional insights. In 1963, the sum spent on assistance was $1,400,000. By 1968, expenses on material assistance operations totalled $3,610,072. However, a decade later the amount spent on material assistance was much higher ($105.6 million in 1978). This implies a certain discrepancy. The emphasis on relief had entered the internal conversation of UNHCR; however, it was not immediately followed by significant financial support.

The fact that during the 1960s UNHCR was lacking field capabilities helps to explain this gap. As a non-operational organization, UNHCR “seeks to promote a general understanding of the problems involved and to encourage and enlist support from governments and other organizations.” To this end, its representatives were predominantly located in different capitals, and in many countries, there were none. They were often kept busy
negotiating with governments, and were involved in humanitarian diplomacy (Egeland, 2013). The growing attention toward material assistance indicates the advent of a new position—in the Bourdieusian sense of a position in the structure—but it was not yet fully staffed. Faced by the mounting misfortunes of the 1960s, UNHCR fought back not with aid convoys or refugee camps, but with words.

4.2 The first stage of development

During the 1960s UNHCR sought wider engagement with refugees worldwide, particularly in Africa. Adapting the developed/developing dichotomy, in the minds of UNHCR experts, this expansion required certain adjustments. Specifically, UNHCR assumed a view regarding the living conditions of refugees much in line with the developmental idealism: the nature of minimal services, education, healthcare, and personal income. In the organization’s eyes, these were the basic requirements for survival, the lowest bar of welfare. The refugees, however, were located in some of the most rural areas of the continent, and the local conditions failed to meet this perceived bar. The High Commissioner described this tension:

My action ends when the refugees attain in principle the standards of living of the local population. However…

experience has shown that this standard is in the developing countries generally insufficient for it to be possible to regard the refugees as being firmly and permanently settled. 13

The organization found it impossible to revoke operations without initiating radical actions. While the host countries struggled to provide minimal welfare services to their citizens, foreign subjects were given lower priority. UNHCR’s solution was simple: to act ‘development’ and to deliver assistance. However, it was feared that aiding one group while excluding another would lead to resentment. Instead, to advance full integration, a program was established, “from which the refugees would benefit on the same terms as the local population.” 14

This initiative is the Zonal Development and Integration approach, promoted in the 1960s in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO; see Crisp, 2001). Under a guiding rationale of channeling assistance toward long-term benefits, not only for refugees, but also the local population in general, its modus operandi was to provide technical aid and financial support to both groups in some of the most remote locations in Africa. 15

What does it all mean? In facing the African conditions, UNHCR demonstrated two tendencies. First, it expressed a development logic, which sees the world through the lens of progress and the transformation of society. This change had been previously associated with Felix Schnyder, the High Commissioner at the time, who situated refugee work as part of a larger UN involvement in Africa (Betts et al., 2012). From a less actor-centric perspective, in the aftermath of World War II, the rationale of development gained ground (Meyer et al., 1975) and countless organizations further contributed to its institutionalization (Chabbott, 1999). Accordingly, the cultural model of the developmental idealism (Thornton et al., 2015) became an integrated part of the global sphere of ideas. It was not just an issue for national policy, but also a social construct internalized by individuals worldwide, including by members of UNHCR.

Second, the organization did not sit still. Under the Zonal Development and Integration approach, UNHCR advanced the provision of substantial technical aid for refugees and nationals alike, arguing that the living conditions in the host countries must improve before permanent solutions could be reached. This approach originated in response to the government of Burundi’s plea to assist with programs designed to integrate newly arrived refugees. Identifying the potential for a permanent solution but lacking the implementation knowledge, UNHCR invited the ILO, a leading development organization, to share its technical expertise during the planning and implementation stages. 16 The target population included the refugee settlements and local residents in the surrounding areas. On this basis, specific actions were undertaken to improve economic infrastructure and agricultural production, training activities, school-level education and health services.

This pilot paved the path to additional projects in the region. 17 In all of these initiatives, UNHCR expressed the developmental logic of setting the refugees and the area on course toward micro-economic modernization,
namely, rural development. As such, it mirrored trends within development circles (see Table 1). In its collaboration with the ILO, the UNHCR did not present a brand new, out-of-the-box solution; it adapted an existing one from the available repertoire of potential courses of action.

Unquestionably, UNHCR was chiefly interested in refugees' needs; however, after launching operations in Africa, it relied upon a development-driven conceptualization. Understanding the world not only from a humanitarian perspective but also via a development cultural model, the UNHCR embarked on the Zonal Development and Integration approach. The organization backed these actions suffused with optimistic faith to mobilize change and economic growth, arguing that "the international efforts for assistance to refugees could be regarded as a useful element in the field of international development aid." Following this rationale, refugees were not portrayed as a burden, but rather "a useful addition to the population of the receiving country and an asset to its economic and social development." In conclusion, the extension into Africa can be seen as a crisis for UNHCR, an event with transformative potential (Koselleck, 2006). Indeed, the organization become more receptive to development knowledge and the boundaries were crossed with the settling of the development rationale within UNHCR.

4.3 Relief gains dominancy

By the late 1960s, development discourse had become silent in UNHCR records. What prevented development knowledge from gaining a firmer footing in UNHCR upon its humanitarian logic? A formalistic argument would turn to the United Nations’ division of labour, wherein the organization was positioned as a mediator that turned to other specialized agencies for their expertise. It is also possible that the capital of the development field did not accompany the newly gained mode of thinking. In other words, UNHCR may have been informed by development knowledge, but the formal ability to act was left in the hands of others. On another level, during the ExCom annual meetings in the 1960s and against the activities in Africa, UNHCR’s members and national representatives alike repeatedly emphasized its humanitarian and apolitical principles. That is, they referred to the field’s logic, in an act that symbolized the redrawing of boundaries.

At the same time, the relief component in the humanitarian field in general (de Waal, 1997), and within UNHCR specifically, intensified. In the early 1970s the General Assembly appointed the organization responsible for several large-scale missions. Extensive repatriation operations took place in Sudan and the Indian sub-continent. Furthermore, the organization was chosen to coordinate humanitarian operations following the 1974 armed conflict in Cyprus. Field officers were introduced in 1975, generating much closer connections between UNHCR personnel and the local conditions of displacement (Morris, 2008). New emergencies arose toward the end of the 1970s, leading to a massive exodus of refugees (from Afghanistan and Cambodia, to name only two). These needs did not go unnoticed: the total voluntary funds expenditure skyrocketed to approximately $500 million in 1980 (compared with $7.4 million in 1970) and the share devoted to relief stood at 60%. In 1970, in contrast, 83% of the budget was devoted to durable solutions.

In sum, the relief position was institutionalized, providing the organization with another operational base for action, alongside its long-recognized function of international protection. And while UNHCR’s actorhood (Meyer & Bromley, 2013) increased, it worked to secure its humanitarian autonomy, a symbolic push against external influences.

4.4 The second stage of development

The late 1970s and early 1980s brought no shortage of emergencies, such as the Soviet-Afghan War and droughts in the Horn of Africa. Massive movements of refugees were recorded, and the general sense at
headquarters was that “the refugee problem has gained in intensity and complexity.” Due to its humanitarian principles, however, UNHCR refused to designate root causes, politics, and conditional structures which lead to refugees' displacement:

Nor can, or should, UNHCR try to tackle any of the so-called "root causes." It is in many cases clear what the cause of a refugee problem is. It is also important that the international community do its utmost to try to remove such causes. But it is not for UNHCR to attempt to solve these problems at their root. UNHCR was, none the less, unwilling to leave refugees' needs unattended, and attempted to promote durable solutions. Out of this tension, the necessity for enduring efforts and long-term planning became obvious. The interface with development was back on the table.

Before elaborating upon the refugee aid and development strategy that dominated in these years, additional contextual background is required to better understand the question of timing. On the international level, since the mid-1970s Western countries began to view asylum as a form of migration, and leaned toward greater restrictions. In refugee policy terms, a shift occurred from resettlement to the containment of refugee movements (Aleinkoff, 1992). At the same time, increasing unrest grew in the Global South, as these countries faced the unequal international distribution of resources. The right to development rhetoric became increasingly dominant among international circles (Whelan, 2015).

National representatives attending the ExCom meeting reflected these two positions. Representatives from the Global North often expressed concerns about the ‘problem’ of “economic migrants,” whereas their colleagues from the Global South emphasized the economic situation in their countries and the need to address root causes (which UNHCR refused to tackle). Hence a push toward development emerged.

From a world society stance, the global institutional arrangement of ‘development’ matured as the number of international organizations, treaties, conferences, and their resources burgeoned during these years (Swiss, 2018). In other words, there was more ‘development’— concepts, language, and social meanings— globally, and it penetrated deeper than ever before into numerous social arenas. This is valid for countries in the Global North and the Global South, as well as for members of the international community, such as the UNHCR. That is not to say that they all become development activists, but that the cultural logic of the developmental idealism further expanded globally.

Put together, these longitudinal processes created a perfect storm, a Bee Swarm that led to the refugee aid and development strategy. In brief, its rationale was to merge development-oriented elements with assistance, so that refugees would integrate socially and economically in the host country. The focus, like the Zonal Development and Integration approach, was on refugee-hosting areas, rather than refugee camps and communities alone. The scope, however, was broader and the strategy should be understood as a wide umbrella. At some point, the budget for the envisioned projects amounted to approximately $362 million, equal to 91% of UNHCR’s total global expenditure at the time (Crisp, 2001).

In 1981 and 1984, UNHCR organized conferences to present dozens of potential projects to the donor community. In August 1983 it convened an experts’ meeting, with members of numerous development agencies, governmental bodies, and research institutions, to study and advance its refugee aid and development policy. The needs of the host country and its people were made cognizant. It was also argued that “equitable assistance … will only be possible if support for refugees is development-oriented from the outset.” In practical terms, the experts proposed engaging refugees in economic activities as soon as possible and integrating them within developmental initiatives.

Simultaneously, a degree of ambiguity did not go unnoticed by UNHCR seniors: “Where is the frontier between humanitarian assistance to refugees, and development? … In some situations, the answer is clear-cut. In others, we are on the borderline.” Aware of this thin line, UNHCR was reluctant to turn into a development organization. Following a decade of coordination with other United Nations agencies, and fully aware of the advantages of an integrated approach, UNHCR’s position was that it “should not assume the role of a development agency, and where developmental initiatives are needed, [its] role should be essentially that of a catalyst and co-ordinator.”
From a differentiation perspective, this makes perfect sense as agents of a field strive to deepen the division of labor between their field and others (Savelsberg, 2015), and this case is no different.

Seeking to strike a balance, the UNHCR invited other organizations (both IGOs and NGOs) to step in when development activities were targeted towards the needs of substantial numbers of non-refugees. A Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) chartered the latter with the responsibility to “lead on refugee-related development projects when UNHCR has exhausted its mandate responsibilities.” UNHCR also never abandoned its core activities, namely, international protection and relief. Notwithstanding, refugee aid and development is a concept that bore its way deep into the internal grammar of the organization in the 1980s.

During those years, UNHCR searched for new means of cooperation with development actors. For example, together with the government of Pakistan and the World Bank, it launched a project to generate “durable economic assets” (e.g., forestry, irrigation, and road improvement) and provide both refugees and the local population “with an opportunity to work and earn an income.” From an outcome-oriented perspective, the need to link refugee aid and development was simple. In the face of cumulative emergencies, this was done “to strengthen the absorptive capacities of host countries and to enhance the refugees’ contribution to their host states.”

This line of reasoning fits with a containment policy (Aleinkoff, 1992) approach, as the host countries were still a great distance from the Global North.

More importantly, developmental logic reached far beyond just digging wells and paving roads. UNHCR attempted to streamline refugee work with regional development. As articulated in one report, the dominant approach was “to promote durable solutions within a developmental context through the specialized agencies and within the macro-developmental priorities of host countries, so that refugee assistance programs would contribute to the overall development efforts of the host communities.” That is, UNHCR’s plan was to encourage international investments and initiate regional development schemes. Turning to such solutions points toward development as a central cultural rule, no longer restricted to agents in the development field. Loans and large-scale infrastructure projects were a major development mechanism well into the 1980s (see Table 1). As such, these were the models, the scripted knowledge available to UNHCR, which were promoted where large concentrations of refugees were found. Fundamentally, the result is the “globalization of aid policy” (Swiss, 2018): the convergence of priorities and ways of action. This was not free from struggle, as preserving the humanitarian nature of the organization was a subject of concern. Nevertheless, even while purity was essential, the boundaries were slackened.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have laid the foundation for an integrative framework that engages world society theory and field theory in a conversation. The theoretical hooks are changes in fields’ boundaries and the proposition that awareness to fields’ dynamics will contribute to deeper understanding of the differentiated internalization of world culture. Empirically, this article argues that the combination of changing needs and situations, and more importantly, the diffusion and growing dominance of development-driven knowledge, facilitated substantial transformation. Firmly positioned within the humanitarian field, UNHCR gradually embraced some development-driven rationales. This does not imply that it had abandoned its humanitarian principles. Likewise, the elements of international protection and relief are as valid today as they were in the past. Still, the question of development has repeatedly resurfaced.

In fact, the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 provides the most recent example. The largest international conference of its kind, it devoted considerable attention to the question of moving from delivering aid to ending need. For this to happen, it was argued, it is necessary to “transcend the humanitarian-development divide.” Whereas MSF openly opposed this direction, a few months later, the High Commissioner addressed this topic in
his opening statement before the ExCom. He fervently argued that a core direction of a new five-year plan is the "firm commitment to securing the engagement of development actors ... [and] to support the inclusion of refugees in national services and development plans."³²

As this article has demonstrated, the idea behind this new plan is, in effect, old news. Since the 1960s the association with developmental ideas keeps re-emerging from time to time. And yet, developmental plans are presented as novel. Also somewhat speculatively, the above findings support the view that the struggle between different positions within UNHCR—"the motor of change" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 205)—led to this amnesia. At the end of each take, despite the growing centrality of development knowledge and its recognition by UNHCR, a withdrawal occurs. Seemingly, orthodoxy gets the upper hand.

Looking closer, some developmental idealism is identifiable with the inner workings of the organization alongside humanitarian sentiment. Its rhetoric, and the solutions that it adopted, reflect internal changes from the field of development. This partial-adaptation-partial-rejection is explained by world society mechanisms. First, logic and solutions originating from the field of development were scripted. As this released them from the shackles of their specific field of origin, they become the subject of global diffusion. Eventually, some elements gain the status of global doxa or "social ether" (Krücken & Drori, 2009, p. 19). This is not only about the adaptation of scripted solutions, à la policy isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Swiss, 2018), but to say that humanitarians gradually come to view the world through a developmental perspective. Put differently, alongside the direct engagement with development experts from organizations such as ILO, UNDP, and the World Bank, UNHCR was affected by the growing institutionalization of development as a global cultural logic. Full adaptation did not occur due to its position within the humanitarian field, which dictates a different logic.

From a wider vantage point, it is reasonable to ask whether UNHCR constitutes an exception. One may argue that it does, being embedded within the United Nations institutional configuration, which impinges on its autonomy. It rests, so to speak, upon a juxtaposition of international currents of aid, and world society theory does attribute a special role to United Nations bodies and similar associations (Schofer et al., 2012). While this may be true, other humanitarian organizations such as CARE and Oxfam have exhibited a similar tendency. They arose as humanitarian organizations during World War II and with time grew to incorporate development activities. While UNHCR is rather implicit about its development orientations, CARE and Oxfam openly embrace this duality.³³

In fact, despite its "pure" position in the humanitarian field (Krause, 2014), MSF oversaw prolonged missions in the battle against epidemics such as HIV/AIDS in South Africa and tuberculosis in Siberia (Fox, 2014). This is precisely the extension of humanitarianism within development that Atlani-Duault, (2007) pointed out. MSF’s response to the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic serves as the latest example. Operating in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, the organization provided essential healthcare and accompanied ministries of health in facing the pandemic.³⁴ While it can be expected during a public health emergency, working together with governments is highly unusual for humanitarian activity, and lends itself closer to development rationale.

This is not to argue for the complete eradication of differences. Rather, and while I did not present a field analysis verbatim ac litteratim, I would like to suggest that these differences in the degree of adaptation of development knowledge by humanitarian organizations result from their positionality and field-related configurations. Located closer to the "cure" of the field, MSF is implicit about its development-like activities. With their liminal positions, CARE and Oxfam are far more explicit.³⁵ Yet UNHCR rests somewhere in between these two positions. Therefore, the ongoing intrusion of development knowledge clashes with humanitarian logic, and its representation is seen as novel. The case of UNHCR demonstrates, therefore, the existence of another stake in the humanitarian field, alongside those previously pointed out by the literature (see Krause, 2014).

Herein lies the more general sociological contribution of this article. The above insights are made possible by looking beyond epistemic divides to incorporate concepts from two distinct traditions of the sociology of knowledge. The deeply constructive assumptions of both theories lay the groundwork for the movement of social knowledge: the dialectic of the theory of practice together with the pivotal role of institutions in the
construction of society. The integrated approach I advocate in this article is, therefore, sensitive to the transnational sphere and global social change. This is not to argue for flattening, but to stress the need to consider the global level and its effect on distinctions. Global institutions and culture are crucial as norms and scripts influence agents embedded not only on the transnational, national, and subnational levels, but also within fields. Although resistance may ensue with the attempt to preserve differentiation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), some shared understanding is none the less gained (Meyer, 2009). Hence, the change in field boundaries accommodates competition alongside interspersion. This coexistence of multiple logic of practice—the ability of humanitarians to follow their humanitarian logic while also thinking via development knowledge—forms the crux of the matter.

These findings bear implications for world society theory, which sometimes observes unequal diffusion (Pope & Meyer, 2016) and generally pays less attention to the question of re-interpretation of globally diffused knowledge at the different levels. To account for it, researchers often turn to decoupling, which emphasizes the adaptation and implantation divide (e.g., Bromley & Powell, 2012; Swiss & Ilonze, 2021). Yet, the desire for autonomy, and acknowledgment of multiple fields, each with its own rules of the game, provide structural insights on the meso factors involved. To extend the argument, field’s positionality can account for the scale of this decoupling, namely, the width of the rift.

In this specific empirical setting, the tension between developmental knowledge—that gains the status of social ether—and local opposition constituted the above-mentioned multiplex. In other cases, perhaps the dynamics would be different, leading to either weaker or stronger rejection. It is reasonable to assume that this is influenced by the degree of independence and dependence of specific fields (Krause, 2018), the hegemonic nature of the external element (Savelsberg, 2021), and as exemplified by MSF, CARE, and Oxfam, by positionality. The point is that acknowledgment of fields’ configurations imbues a structural setting to the meso-level institutionalization of world society.

To conclude, the search for the limits of a field is misdirected (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 100), particularly as their influence is much more far-reaching than ever before. Instead, it is the pursuit of overlaps and their rejection that seems to be the most promising approach. To this end, the integration of world society and field theory is particularly useful when considering transnational processes of the diffusion of culture. Understanding and awareness of these multiple levels and possibilities for the transfer of knowledge will help to elucidate the fluxing of boundaries and their transformation across time. It will also assist in explaining the processes that impact variations in the ongoing institutionalization of world society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to Elizabeth Heger Boyle, Joachim Savelsberg, Cawo Abdi, Joseph Gerteis, and Carrie Oelberger, for their invaluable advice and feedback. The comments received from the anonymous reviewers also contributed much to the improvement of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
I have no data which is mine to share. Thus I think not applicable is the right statement.

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1 Recent literature has devoted attention to the spaces between fields. Liu (2021) proposed a Simmelian typology based on the dimensions of heterogeneity and social distance, whereas Eyal pointed to social activities that unfold between fields (Eyal, 2013; see Arrigoni, 2021).

2 Power, which is fundamental to Bourdieu and is more silent in world society theory, also deserves consideration. Yet, a just treatment is outside the scope of this article. Silence, however, does not equal absenteeism. Rather, in its own way, institutional theory had always been critical (Drori, 2020).

3 I wish to thank Elizabeth Heger Boyle who in her characteristic generosity directed me to the right literature.

4 From here onward, while the argument can be extended also to social activities within national fields, the empirics refer to global fields. For the sake of brevity, throughout the article the word “field” is used rather than “global field.”

5 Due to limited space and focus, I cannot fully describe the multidimensional aspects of development. It is sufficient to point out that the flatter reading of development was for many decades the dominant one and was heavily institutionalized. This fact is the main criticism of many scholars (e.g., Escobar, 2012; Ferguson, 1990).

6 Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Retrieved November 4, 2019 https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c39e1.pdf.

7 Statement made by the High Commissioner. January 27, 1959, Geneva. p. 2. Report on the first Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme (hereafter, ExCom report). UNHCR archive, Found 12. A/AC.96/18.

8 Statement by the Deputy High Commissioner, 14–22 May 1962, Geneva. p. 1. ExCom seventh Session. A/AC.96/170.

9 All sums are in US dollars and are unadjusted. Summary of data and proposals presented to the committee by the high commissioner, April 20, 1964, Geneva. ExCom 11th session. A/AC.96/1.3.

10 Summary of information on UNHCR material assistance operations, October 16, 1968, Geneva. ExCom 19th Session. A/AC.96/INF.88.

11 Report on UNHCR assistance activities in 1977–1978, August 9, 1978, Geneva. ExCom 29th Session. A/AC.96/553.

12 See note 10.

13 Opening statement by the High Commissioner, 16–24 May 1966, Geneva p. 9. ExCom 15th Session. A/AC.96/334 Appendix I.

14 Statement by the High Commissioner, 18–25 May 1964, Geneva. p. 7. ExCom 11th Session. A/AC.96/248/Corr.1. Appendix.

15 1964 Program—new projects, April 13, 1964, Geneva. ExCom 11th Session. A/AC.96/236.

16 Goetz, N. Toward self sufficiency and integration: an historical evaluation of assistance programs for Rwandese refugees in Burundi, 1962–1965. March 2003, Geneva. UNHCR, Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit.; The settlement of Rwanda refugees in the Congo and Burundi, a program of integration and zonal development. 1967, Geneva. ILO. 67B09/78.

17 See note 16. p. 3.

18 Report on new refugee situations, March 12, 1962, Geneva. p. 2. A/AC.96/158.

19 Statement by the High Commissioner, May 16, 1966, Geneva. p. 6. ExCom 15th Session. A/AC.96/334 Appendix I.

20 Unfortunately, division of expenses was not recorded in a systematic way by the organization. It is available for some years and not for others. Statement by the Director of Assistance, October 1984. ExCom 35th Session.

21 Statement by the High Commissioner, October 6, 1980, Geneva. p. 1. ExCom 31st Session. A/AC.96/588 Annex

22 Statement by the High Commissioner, October 11, 1982, Geneva. p. 5. ExCom 33rd Session. A/AC.96/614 Annex.

23 Statement by the High Commissioner, October 12, 1981, Geneva. ExCom 32nd Session.

24 Refugee aid and development, September 12, 1983, Geneva. p. 3. Underline in the original. ExCom 34th Session. A/AC.96/627 Annex I.

25 See note 24. p. 2.

26 Refugee aid and development, August 28, 1984, Geneva. p. 2. ExCom 35th Session. A/AC.96/645.

27 UNHCR activities financed by voluntary funds: Report for 1985–86 and proposed programs and budget for 1987, August 7, 1986, Geneva. p. 11. A/AC.96/677(Part I).

28 Report on UNHCR assistance activities in 1983–1984, August 1, 1984, Geneva. p. x. ExCom 35th Session. A/AC.96/639.
30 Statement by the High Commissioner, October 3, 1988, Geneva. p. 7. ExCom 39th Session. A/AC.96/721 Annex I.
31 One Humanity: shared responsibility. February 2, 2016. p. 28. UN General Assembly A/70/709. Retrieved May 2, 2018 https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/822154?ln=en.
32 High Commissioner's opening statement. October 3, 2016, Geneva. 67th Session, ExCom. Retrieved July 18, 2019 https://www.unhcr.org/admin/hc/speeches/57e52c777/high-commissioner's-opening-statement-67th-session-executive-committee-high.html.
33 This point was covered by Black (1992) and Henry (1999) and can be seen also in the history sections of the organizations’ websites. Retrieved 10 September, 2021 https://www.care-international.org/who-we-are-1/cares-history https://www.oxfam.org/en/our-history.
34 As documented online. Retrieved 11 September, 2021 https://www.msf.org/covid-19-depth.

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**How to cite this article:** Rotem, N. (2022). World society and field theory: The infiltration of development into humanitarianism. *The British Journal of Sociology, 73*, 402–420. [https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12932](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12932)