Improving the use of history by the international humanitarian sector

John Nicholas Borton

HCRI, University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This article challenges the often implicit assumption by historians working on humanitarian history that their work is being read and used by present-day humanitarian workers. Key characteristics of the modern-day humanitarian sector are highlighted, including the unpredictable and often inadequate levels of funding, stressful working conditions and high staff turnover. The article argues that, to a significant degree, the humanitarian sector is ahistorical and locked into a state of ‘perpetual present’. Two principal obstacles to the greater use of historical knowledge within the present-day humanitarian sector are identified as being the limited accessibility of the available literature on humanitarian history and the perceptions that the work of humanitarian historians is of limited relevance. The paper concludes by describing recent initiatives including the planned humanitarianhistory.org website which is intended to improve the accessibility of the available literature and facilitate engagement and co-production between historians and humanitarian workers.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 February 2015
Accepted 9 November 2015

KEYWORDS

international humanitarian sector; history; humanitarian history; historiography; academic-practitioner engagement; co-production

Introduction

Rainer Baudendistel is a rare example of a humanitarian worker turned historian. Having served with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Ethiopia during and after the 1984 famine he went on to study and publish an account of the experience of the Red Cross during the 1935–6 Italian invasion of Ethiopia 50 years earlier. In his account he writes:

To my surprise, which in retrospect was absolutely unwarranted – one underestimates how little human nature changes – I discovered that many issues of humanitarian aid in the Italo-Ethiopian war were similar to those I had encountered fifty years later. Chief amongst these were whether an organisation like the ICRC should speak out against violations of international humanitarian law or remain silent in the interests of the victims; how much influence it had on the belligerents; how to control the unavoidable instrumentalisation of its assistance; and, finally, how such questions impinged on the composition and orientation of the ICRC itself.1

CONTACT  John Nicholas Borton  j.borton@odi.org.uk

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This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
That the humanitarian sector has a rich history full of parallels with the present and so is capable of offering insight and lessons of use to present-day humanitarian workers is attested by other contributions to this special edition. This richness and the benefits it potentially holds for those working in the humanitarian sector today is recognised by at least some of those working within the sector. For instance, Baroness Amos, the UN’s Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator from 2010–15, wrote that ‘to shape our future, we must understand our past.’ In their 2009 survey Shaping the Humanitarian World Walker and Maxwell wrote: ‘Understanding the history of humanitarian action helps understand why it is the way it is today, and helps identify how it can, and maybe should, change in the future.’

Davey et al. identify three mutually reinforcing ways in which the international humanitarian sector could benefit from a greater historical perspective. Namely:

1. A fuller awareness of the challenges that humanitarian action has faced in the past – the mistakes made, as well as the successes – will aid reflection upon the challenges facing practitioners today, and help in the development of more appropriate practical responses.

2. A greater attention to the past will generate a more informed critical perspective on processes of operational and organisational change and the evolution of new norms. By shedding light on the factors that have encouraged or inhibited changes in practice and in the normative frameworks that make practice possible, historical analysis can inform reflection upon the changes that may take place now and in the future.

3. A stronger engagement with history will help those that make up the system to more accurately perceive its origins and identity in a broader global perspective. In being more aware of its own past and recognising the specificity of that experience, the international sector will have a sounder basis from which to engage with those who were shaped by a different set of historical experiences.

Despite such benefits, for the most part the humanitarian sector displays a marked lack of historical perspective or appreciation for the value of historical knowledge. Field staff are often unaware of relevant historical precedents and contextual factors that have shaped the context in which they are operating. For instance, very few of the international humanitarian workers that arrived in Darfur in 2004/5 are likely to have read de Waal’s classic account of the 1984–5 famine in Darfur. Fewer still were likely to have been familiar with accounts of the large-scale food distribution operations that took place in Darfur and neighbouring Kordofan in 1984–6.

Writing in 2007 about the low profile of history in the field of Refugee Studies Marfleet stated:

New and renewed refugee crises such those in Iraq, Darfur, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and Somalia each speak of the past. They are the outcome of complex colonial legacies, global developments, external interventions, local tensions and conflicts. None can be understood without history, yet we invariably approach them on an ahistorical basis.

A 2012 evaluation of the response by member agencies of the UK’s Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) to the food crisis in East Africa found that ‘DEC agencies appear to suffer from some loss of institutional memory concerning their longer-term engagement
in Ethiopia. Some of the organisations concerned have been working in Ethiopia for forty years, but government officials sometimes appeared more familiar with this history than agency staff.

Such is the degree of ahistoricism within much of the sector that initiatives aimed at fostering improved practice tend to only reference recent practice. Decades of prior practice, which may be just as pertinent and necessary for understanding why current practice takes the form it does is often ignored. A recent example of this is the Humanitarian Negotiations Information Portal, which is aimed at improving practice on negotiations with armed actors. Of the 243 resources listed in the Resources Database in May 2014, only two analysed practice before 2001, thereby omitting decades of prior negotiation experience and the ability to understand the long-term effects of engagement with armed groups.

In what might well be considered as the first comprehensive history of the humanitarian sector, Michael Barnett notes:

> Although there is a growing line of commentaries of humanitarianism that are sensitive to its paradoxes and dilemmas, because they limit themselves to contemporary events they fail to appreciate fully how these tensions have been present from the beginning.

Of course there are some honourable exceptions to the generalisation that the humanitarian sector is for the most part ahistorical. MSF’s ‘Speaking Out Case Studies’ series is a rare example of a major humanitarian agency valuing its historical experience as a source of learning that it is now gradually sharing with a wider audience. The Sudan Open Archive is an attempt to capture and share sources and materials from over a century of relief and development efforts in a country that has been the site of repeated relief operations mounted in response to recurring disasters, conflicts and political and economic crises with the objective of improving policy and practice.

Also, it should be said that since the 1990s the humanitarian sector has steadily increased the number of evaluations being undertaken of humanitarian programmes and also of operations and has now become a *de rigueur* practice and tool for learning and accountability within the humanitarian sector (Wood, Apthorpe and Borton, *Evaluating International Humanitarian Action*). This has created a respect for at least the ‘immediate past’ within the sector and a desire to ‘learn lessons’ from that experience as captured by evaluation reports. The database of evaluation reports that has been built up provides a valuable resource for contemporary historians. Yet the respect now afforded to evaluation and the immediate past, for the vast majority of workers within the sector, does not extend further back into the realm of humanitarian history.

Why is this? Why are staff working in a sector with such a rich history often so unaware of where it has come from and the range of experiences that have helped forge and form the way the sector, its structures and practices have evolved? Why are the staff working in a particular operation often so unaware of previous operations in the same area even as little as 20 or even ten years previously? This article argues that the answer lies in a combination of factors that limit the ability and willingness of humanitarian workers to engage with humanitarian history, and also that the way that the history is written, rarely speaks to the practical and operational concerns and interests of present-day humanitarian workers.

To help explain this situation it is necessary to have some understanding of the modern-day humanitarian sector and how it operates.
Some characteristics of the modern-day humanitarian sector

A sense of the scale of the present-day international humanitarian sector can be gained from the following statistics. In 2014 (a year marked by multiple large-scale emergencies in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan and the Ebola epidemic in West Africa), conflicts, violence and persecution displaced over 58 million people and an estimated 107.3 million people were affected by disasters caused by natural hazards and funding contributions to the international humanitarian sector totalled US$24.5 billion. The combined field staff of the operational humanitarian agencies (NGO, Red Cross and UN) was estimated to be 274,000 in 2012.

Key characteristics of the humanitarian sector that might have some bearing, directly or indirectly, on attitudes to history and historical knowledge include the following: unpredictable and often inadequate levels of funding; insecurity; stressful working conditions; high levels of staff turnover; an acute focus on the present. These characteristics are described below.

Unpredictable and often inadequate levels of funding

The majority of funds (76%) channelled into and through the humanitarian sector are provided by governments, whilst private voluntary contributions account for the remaining 24%. Ninety percent of the funding from governments is provided by members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation (OECD) and the remainder by non-OECD countries such as Turkey and Kuwait.

The level of funding available in an operation is only in part a response to the level of humanitarian need. Other factors that are often at play include: the foreign-policy interests of key donors; political and economic factors; the level of media coverage; the nature and specialisms of the agencies present; and whether or not they have access to the affected areas. Funding levels can be highly variable, with some responses being severely under-funded and some excessively funded – the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami being an extreme example of the latter. In 2013 UN-coordinated appeals (which may be taken as a partial barometer of the cost of meeting needs in given operations) received on average just 65% of their funding targets.

Whilst some of the variability has been reduced by measures such as the Central Emergency Response Fund and pooled funding mechanisms, the level of funding that will be available for a particular operation remains very unpredictable and very often significantly below that which is required. An analysis of the state of humanitarian funding conducted for a meeting of donors and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in 2007 concluded: “The donor, UN and NGO reforms of the past decade may have improved individual components of the system, but its overall architecture is still inherently inefficient.”

At the operational level NGOs play a major role in the actual distribution of assistance and implementation of humanitarian programmes. Typically a UN agency or a donor organisation may fund an international NGO which may distribute the assistance directly or partner with a local NGO to deliver the assistance. Information on the proportion of assistance that is managed by NGOs in the final stages of the ‘aid chain’ is rarely available, but it is probably fair to say that international and national NGOs manage 80% or more of the final stage. Whilst the total number of NGOs involved in the humanitarian sector is over
4000, five international NGO federations/organisations (MSF, CRS, Oxfam International, Save the Children Alliance and World Vision International) account for around 38% of the total humanitarian expenditure by international NGOs. Whilst these large international federations/organisations are comparatively well resourced and are usually able to invest in systems to improve their professionalism and the quality of their programmes, they may still struggle to raise the necessary funds. For the majority of the 4000+ humanitarian NGOs involved in the sector it is invariably a much tougher struggle.

Many humanitarian NGOs rely to some degree on government funding. Typically a funding contract with a donor such as DFID or ECHO will provide only 7% of the organisation’s overhead costs. Privately agency staff will often admit that actual overhead costs are nearer the 12–15% mark. Humanitarian NGOs that rely too heavily on donor-funded contracts and fail to build up their own (unrestricted) private sources of funding have experienced organisation failure (as in the case of the UK humanitarian NGO Children’s Aid Direct in 2002) or were obliged to merge with a larger NGO (as in the case of Merlin which merged with Save the Children in 2013–14).

With so many separate NGOs involved, there are significant (but as yet inadequately researched and quantified) levels of duplication inherent within the sector. Whilst some low-profile operations (sometimes referred to as ‘forgotten emergencies’) are undertaken by a small number of UN agencies and NGOs, other high-profile operations attract much larger numbers and agency behaviours become more competitive as they compete for profile and funding. In such contexts effective co-ordination becomes significantly more challenging. Major evaluations of the international response to the conflict and genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and to the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004/5 concluded that there were ‘too many NGOs’ present in some areas covered by the operation. Even greater numbers of NGOs and other humanitarian organisations were involved in the response to the January 2010 Earthquake in Haiti. Within just three weeks of the earthquake an estimated 400 humanitarian organisations were involved in the response, a number that increased still further over the following months.

Insecurity

Whilst some humanitarian workers are based in regional centres or in relatively secure national capitals, the vast majority work in field locations that are often insecure. Since 2005 the number of attacks on aid workers has increased steeply (measured in both absolute terms and relative to the steady increase in the number of aid workers). The year 2013 saw a spike in the number of attacks and their impact. In all there were 251 separate attacks which affected 460 aid workers. Of these 151 were killed and 134 were kidnapped. The spike in attacks was driven principally by the escalating conflicts and insecurity in Syrian and South Sudan. These two countries along with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan account for three-quarters of all attacks.

Stressful working conditions

Though insecurity is a reality for many humanitarian workers, it is often not the primary source of stress. A 2003 research study within a major international NGO concluded:
The most stressful events in humanitarian work have to do with the organisational culture, management style or operational objectives of an NGO or agency, rather than external security risks or poor environmental factors. Aid workers, basically have a pretty shrewd idea of what they are getting into when they enter this career, and dirty clothes, gun shots at night and lack of electricity do not surprise them. Inter and intra-agency politics, inconsistent management styles, lack of team work and unclear or conflicting organisational objectives, however combine to create a background of chronic stress and pressure that over time wears people down and can lead to burnout or even physical collapse.27

A follow-up study within the same international NGO six years later ranked the top five sources of respondent stress as:

1. Workload;
2. Ability to achieve work goals and objectives;
3. Working hours;
4. Status of employment contract;
5. Feeling undervalued and/or unable to contribute to decision making.28

Such stresses contribute to increased rates of depression among aid workers following their deployment. A longitudinal study of 212 aid workers from 19 NGOs assessed them at the pre-deployment, post-deployment and three-to-six months-after deployment stages and found marked increases in the levels of depression. Those reporting depression symptoms were assessed at 10.4% at pre-deployment, 19.5% at post-deployment and 20.1% three to six months after deployment.29

High levels of staff turnover

The combination of the high levels of stress, unpredictable funding, short contracts and difficult working environment contribute to high levels of ‘dysfunctional’ (as distinct from ‘functional’) staff turnover. Starting about a decade ago dysfunctional staff turnover became a major concern of humanitarian agencies30 and though progress has been made in addressing the issue it remains a significant concern. Just how high it is and how much higher it is within the humanitarian sector when compared to other sectors is unclear as a result of poor and unstandardised monitoring of the phenomenon by agencies. Among the consequences of dysfunctional staff turnover identified by Loquercio et al. at the individual level are: added workload; poor morale and job satisfaction; and stress-induced health issues. At programme level the consequences identified are lack of continuity and reduced programme quality. At organisational level dysfunctional staff turnover contributes to a loss of organisational, programmatic and operational knowledge.

As well as the immediate direct costs of additional end of contract/separation costs and additional recruitment costs, agencies also experience the indirect costs of lower engagement and motivation; inefficiencies, mistakes and delays; and (critically from our perspective), a loss of institutional memory.31

An acute focus on the present

The raison d’être of humanitarian agencies is the saving of life and the relief of suffering caused by natural disasters, conflicts and social and economic crises that cause displacement or acute hardship. It is an organisational imperative that such agencies act and act quickly
to save lives. In an increasingly 24/7 media environment, delays in response can result in negative media coverage that may damage an agency’s public reputation.32 Not surprisingly, the culture within most humanitarian agencies is one that values action and speed and attaches less value to reflection and respect for the past. To borrow a term coined by Lewis in relation to development agencies, humanitarian agencies are locked in a ‘perpetual present’.33 Such a culture, deriving from organisational imperatives, is only reinforced by the characteristics noted above of insecure environments, stress, the frequent lack of funding in relation to humanitarian needs, short contracts, dysfunctional staff turnover and weak organisational memory.

Hard-pressed field staff focus, at times to the exclusion of everything else, on the information, knowledge and actions that are immediately required in a humanitarian operation. The type of information and knowledge that absorbs them typically might include: the findings of the latest needs-assessment survey; announcements by politicians and government representatives with a bearing on the on-going operation; a report on logistical access constraints in the programme area; information from finance staff on status of the funding pipeline; or developments in relation to co-ordination arrangements. Such information will be registered, assessed and, if necessary, action taken to adapt to the present, ever evolving, reality.

If and when they do have time to relax, most humanitarian field staff use it to socialise or to ‘switch-off’ by exercising, reading novels or watching videos. If these opportunities are not available or pall, field staff may use any remaining spare time to work on a report or read reports by their colleagues. With their sole reason to be in that place being to keep the operation moving at the tempo required by the situation, the concept of ‘spare time’ holds little meaning for many humanitarian workers and the only time they are not working or in meetings they are generally asleep. Mealtimes are often snatched or used as an opportunity to catch up with colleagues and share operation-related information. Admittedly in the more chronic, less urgent, humanitarian operations, some field staff may well use their spare time to pursue their own interests and/or professional development. But, it is a rare member of field staff who will use such time to read about the history of the cultures and locations they are currently working in.34

**Obstacles to the greater use of history in the humanitarian sector**

Whilst the ‘perpetual present’ and the widespread ahistorical attitude of the humanitarian sector may appear unshakeable, there is no fundamental reason why the sector cannot learn to better appreciate the value of historical knowledge and make greater use of its own history. I would argue that the sector’s appreciation for and use of historical knowledge would be significantly improved through the following two measures:

1. Improving the ability of humanitarian workers (in particular) to access the available literature on humanitarian history;
2. Improving the engagement between humanitarian agencies and historians working on the humanitarian sector.

The specific obstacles that will need to be addressed if the sector is to develop a greater appreciation of the value of historical knowledge are identified below.
Limited accessibility of the available literature on humanitarian history

Imagine for a moment the situation of a humanitarian worker wanting to explore the history of their particular sectoral specialism (be it health, shelter, water sanitation and hygiene, logistics or nutrition) or perhaps the history of humanitarian action in the country where they are now working.

A first obstacle they face is finding out what literature is actually available, for they do not have access to the excellent online library resources available to university-based students and researchers. Beyond searches with Google and within Amazon, the vast majority of humanitarian workers are unfamiliar with even the limited tools and services such as Google Scholar, Mendeley or Questia.

A second obstacle is how they actually obtain published materials on humanitarian history. If we take the example of publications by Michael Barnett, a distinguished historian of the humanitarian sector, an interested humanitarian worker can purchase his 2011 book *Empire of Humanity* through Amazon for £13 and then arrange for an obliging colleague or visitor to carry it to the programme where they are working, be it South Sudan, Jordan, Sierra Leone or wherever. Should that humanitarian worker want to explore Michael Barnett’s work a bit further and purchase a copy of his paper ‘Evolution Without Progress? Humanitarianism in a World of Hurt’ published in the journal *International Organization*, they will first have to know of its existence, locate it via the Cambridge Journals website and purchase a download at a cost of £20. Outside of the university system and those participating in PhD programmes, it is very expensive for humanitarian personnel to access journal articles.

Whilst some agencies subscribe to a limited number of journals and make their contents available to staff through intranet systems, most do not. One of the UK’s leading relief and development agencies admitted to the author in 2014 that it did not have a subscription to the journal *Disasters* which is not just a leading journal in the sector but is also a leading source of articles on humanitarian history. Whilst the increasing number of open-access journal articles is welcome, the reality is that, without an Athens or Shibboleth login, the vast majority (perhaps 80–90%) of the literature on humanitarian history is not readily accessible to humanitarian workers.

A third obstacle is the extraordinarily diffuse nature of the available literature on humanitarian history. In 2013 a colleague (Eleanor Davey) and I prepared a sample list of 500 books and journal articles on humanitarian history for a pilot website on humanitarian history (referred to elsewhere in this article) using our combined EndNote personal libraries. Our selection sought to include: sources that are of historical significance because of the time when they were written, those that describe/analyse a particular event or period in history; and those that try to use such analysis to reflect on current concerns/contexts. Whilst both of us had a personal sense of ‘good examples that really should be in the list’, we certainly did not go out of our way to draw on the most eclectic journals that we could. Nevertheless, subsequent analysis of the 500 references on the list reveals what a remarkably wide range of disciplines and journals the history of the humanitarian sector actually draws from.

Of the 500 references 262 were books and monographs and 238 were journal articles. Remarkably the 238 journal articles had been published in no fewer than 133 different journals! Only 11 journals were responsible for more than two articles. These 11 journals are listed below in ranked order:
• Disasters (36 articles)\textsuperscript{36}
• International Review of the Red Cross (12 articles)
• Journal of Contemporary History (10 articles)
• Journal of Refugee Studies (6 articles)
• American Historical Review (5 articles)
• International Affairs (5 articles)
• Refugee Survey Quarterly (4 articles)
• American Ethnologist (3 articles)
• Journal of Global History (3 articles)
• The Lancet (3 articles)
• The Journal of Nutrition (3 articles)

The following 17 journals contributed two papers to the collection:

• African Affairs
• American Journal of Public Health
• Annals of the Association of American Geographers
• Architectural Design
• Environmental Hazards
• European Journal of American Studies
• Geographical Review
• Human Organisation
• Human Rights Quarterly
• International Migration Review
• Journal of African History
• Journal of Asian Studies
• Mass Emergencies
• Pan American Journal of Public Health
• Review of African Political Economy
• The Historical Journal
• The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History

What this process revealed was how widely, remarkably so, the journal literature on humanitarian history is spread. It is diffused across: journals focusing on specialist sectorial disciplines (health, nutrition, anthropology); journals focusing on the humanitarian field (disasters, emergencies, refugees, etc.); journals focusing on other fields related to the humanitarian sector (international affairs, political economy, etc.); area-studies journals (Africa, Asia, geography, etc.); historical journals; and the journal of a particular humanitarian movement/family of organisations (International Review of the Red Cross). That journals focusing on history do not feature more strongly in this list might come as a surprise to many historians.

The remarkable diffusion of the journal literature on humanitarian history stems in part from the large number of sectorial specialisms covered by the overall humanitarian sector, The Sphere Project, initiated in 1997 by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to determine and promote standards to guide the humanitarian sector in its responses, included five core sectors in 2000 when the first edition of the Sphere Handbook was published. At that time the five core sectors regarded as being
central to the lifesaving objectives of the sector were: Water-supply sanitation; Food aid; Nutrition; Shelter and Site Planning; and Health Services.

Whilst the ‘core sectors’ in subsequent versions of the Sphere Handbook have changed little, the number of additional sectors that are now widely regarded as part of the services and fields that may legitimately be covered by the international humanitarian sector has grown dramatically as the scale and scope of the overall sector has increased. Now education, agricultural rehabilitation, temporary employment creation, psycho-social health, sexual and reproductive health, and livestock interventions to assist livestock and their owners affected by humanitarian crises are all regarded as legitimate, indeed vital parts of an overall humanitarian response. In recent years there has also been a concerted push to rebalance the focus of international and national efforts from disaster response to disaster prevention and disaster preparedness under the rubric of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). Driven in part by increasing fears about global climate change, DRR sits alongside and partially overlaps with the international humanitarian sector, further increasing the number of sectors and activities that are regarded as part of the international humanitarian sector. Each of these sectorial specialisms has a particular journal or journals associated with it and those working in the sectors seek to publish their papers, some of which deal with historical or historically significant matters, in these journals as well as in the disaster and humanitarian-focused journals.

Perceptions of limited ‘relevance’ of the work of humanitarian historians

In the constantly evolving, ‘perpetual present’ of the modern-day humanitarian, reports quickly become ‘out of date’ and viewed as being of little relevance. An analysis of what happened in the same operation just five years previously is likely to be regarded as obsolete and having nothing of value to say to current operations. Accounts and analyses of operations in the same area 10 or 20 years before will generally be regarded as irrelevant. Of course, the situation in the current operation will differ in many respects from that 20 years earlier, but not to be aware of those earlier operations, the challenges they faced and the extent to which they were overcome, is to ignore an experience and contextual knowledge that could well be of value in the current operation.

Writings on humanitarian history and humanitarian operations throughout history naturally span the different levels (i.e., the whole international humanitarian sector; particular operations within a country; particular programmes and projects at particular locations within operations) and different perspectives covering continuums between, for instance: abstract theory and operational practice; the very general and the very particular; and purely descriptive accounts of events and intricate analysis of actions and outcomes.

From the perspective of the humanitarian worker preoccupied with information that is of direct use in their current concerns and tasks, for historical writing to be perceived as ‘relevant’, it has to speak to, or at least help inform the understanding of, those current concerns. For most humanitarian workers those concerns tend to be specific to the geographical area and sector they are working in, specific to the particular issue/s they are working on, and strongly concerned with operational practice. Writings that are perceived as ‘too abstract’, ‘too general’, ‘too analytical’ and ‘not sufficiently operational or practice-related’ will often be discounted out of hand. I would contend that for many humanitarian workers a significant
proportion of the output of historians working on the humanitarian sector is not regarded as having relevance to them in their work.

Of course ‘relevance’ is very much in the eye of the beholder. It could be argued that what is perceived as ‘not relevant’ by humanitarian workers could at the same time be pertinent for the humanitarian community as a whole because it focuses on an issue such as an ethical dilemma or an underlying trend that was experienced by agencies in the past that may be similar to those being faced by agencies in the present.

Nevertheless, the point here is that if historians of the humanitarian sector wanting their work to be read by, and of use to, present-day humanitarian workers, then they will need to focus on, and present, the historical material in a way that enables present-day humanitarian workers to identify and engage with the historical material. This will require historians seeking to understand the current concerns and preoccupations of present-day humanitarian workers and analysing and presenting their historical material in a way that is more able to engage present-day humanitarians.

This is not to argue that all historical research and scholarship should view present-day humanitarian workers as the primary audience; clearly there are other audiences and purposes of such scholarship. However, historians of the humanitarian sector do need to be aware that their work is more likely to achieve traction with humanitarian agencies and their staff, if it draws out and highlights aspects such as:

- The work of particular agencies (or related predecessors) that are still operating;
- The geographical areas of historical operations and the extent of overlap with areas of current humanitarian operations;
- The details of operational practices (e.g., how relief goods were actually distributed, how areas and beneficiaries were selected and targeted, how logistical systems worked and how accountability was ensured to both funders and the affected population;
- The specifics of organisational relationships and dynamics, for instance how agencies were funded; how they co-ordinated their activities with each other; how they managed their relationships with the host government and opposition/rebel groups and the extent to which they were able to adhere or not to their humanitarian principles.

The more that the historical material can draw out details and concerns that are of interest to present-day humanitarian workers, the greater the chance that it will be read and used by them.

In making this point, it is of course necessary to acknowledge some of the constraints under which academic historians operate. The ability to access the archives of humanitarian agencies is vital for historians working on humanitarian history. In many cases such archives are far from complete and in some agencies have not been well maintained. Whilst some humanitarian agencies have opened up their archives, others restrict access. For instance, the archives of Save the Children UK limit access to researchers interested in the period since 1972 following a ‘30 year rule’ decision taken in 2002 which has yet to be revised. In some contrast, in 2013 Oxfam GB donated its archive to Oxford University’s Bodleian Library, which is currently cataloguing the archive in three 18-month stages and making a tranche of the archive available on completion of each stage. The entire Oxfam GB archive will become available to researchers in June 2017.

As well as archive-access issues, academic historians are also somewhat constrained in the way they work. In preparing work for academic publication for instance, historians are
expected to conform to certain formats and methodologies that may limit their ability to speak directly to a practitioner audience. In addition, robust historical inquiry may require the exploration of areas that do not link to the present. For instance, Abigail Green’s impressive recent examination of humanitarianism in the nineteenth century explicitly calls upon historians ‘to look not just at those movements and discourses that relate obviously to our contemporary world, but at those that do not.’

Until recently, the professional-incentive structure for academic historians encouraged them to write more for their peers than a wider audience. However, the advent of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK with its inclusion of ‘impact’ criteria, is now incentivising greater engagement and co-production between historians and ‘users’, as well as greater engagement in the media as ‘public intellectuals and in non-academic social networks.’ Separate from the REF the ‘co-production agenda is also being encouraged by the Arts and Humanities Research Council along with the other UK Higher Education funding bodies.’ Such changes in the incentive structures for academic historians would seem to present a welcome opportunity for increased engagement between historians and humanitarian agencies.

The Non-State Humanitarianism Network formed in 2013 and convened by historians at the University of Birmingham and the National University of Ireland Galway represents a welcome attempt by historians to map out the research agenda on humanitarian history and provide a forum for university-based historians and representatives of humanitarian agencies to engage. This special issue is one of the products of that engagement.

**Changing attitudes towards history within the humanitarian sector**

Of course, it should not just be down to historians to modify their work and the presentation of it to better ‘speak’ to those working in the humanitarian sector. Movement is also required within the humanitarian sector itself so that there is a greater appreciation of the value and potential benefits of historical knowledge. Some movement is already apparent in this regard.

Between 2012 and 2015 the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), a respected research and analysis group within the humanitarian sector, undertook ‘The Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action’, a programme of work that included five regional conferences which by mid-2015 produced 13 publications with four more planned for publication in late 2015 and a book synthesising the results of all the work due in early 2016. That one of the publications was the most downloaded item among HPG’s total publication output perhaps signals a growing appetite within the sector for easily accessible accounts of the sector’s history.

A joint initiative by HPG and the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) of the University of Manchester, known as Humanitarianhistory.org, plans to establish a website that will not only help improve the ability of humanitarian workers and others to access the available but widely dispersed literature on humanitarian history, but also to improve the engagement between humanitarian agencies and historians working on the humanitarian sector. Once the planned website is fully operational Humanitarianhistory.org will comprise the following elements:

1. **An interactive timeline** of 80 key events/episodes within the period 1850–2010. Each event/episode will comprise a summary supported by a fuller explanatory
text that also lists key references, resources (including relevant archives and collections) and useful additional information. The objective will be to ‘draw in’ users and make them aware of the wealth of historical knowledge available on the key events/episodes;

(2) **A searchable bibliographic catalogue** based on the current collection of 3500+ books and journal articles on humanitarian history developed by HPG and HCRI. The catalogue will include full texts of those publications free of copyright restrictions;

(3) **An online training module in historical methods** to help those unfamiliar with historical methods make better use of the historical resources for humanitarian practice;

(4) **A directory of on-going international research on humanitarian history**, to be maintained through the participation of researchers wishing to profile their work;

(5) **A ‘community-edited’ space facilitating discussion and comment**, to encourage debate of the events featured on the timeline; and

(6) **A facility for digitising and uploading new documents and audio-visual resources** to allow the capture of new resources for future study.

To complement the website, a programme to encourage the use of history in humanitarian education and training provided by organisations such as DisasterReady.org and the Humanitarian Leadership Academy are planned, together with the production of a range of dissemination and communication products and advocacy efforts targeted on senior agency staff and key thought leaders within the sector.

It is hoped that two particular components of the planned site – the directory of on-going international research on humanitarian history and the ‘community-edited’ space – will encourage and facilitate engagement and exchange between humanitarian agencies and their staff and historians working on the humanitarian sector. Knowledge of on-going historical research will enable interested agencies and their personnel to engage with the researchers whilst discussions on the community-edited space will enable humanitarians and historians to discuss particular historical cases and perhaps draw out aspects of relevance to present-day operations. The online training module in historical methods will enable interested humanitarians to better appreciate historical methods and the opportunities as well as constraints experienced by historians. Over time it is hoped that greater exchange between humanitarians and historians will lead to new research initiatives including co-production initiatives between historians and humanitarian agencies and thereby to the greater appreciation of the value and benefits of history within the humanitarian sector.

Frustratingly, efforts to obtain funding for the humanitarianhistory.org project have so far not been successful. However it is hoped that funding sources will be identified during 2015.

**Conclusion**

Whilst present-day humanitarian workers are unaware of much of the output of historians working on the history of the humanitarian sector, there are good reasons to believe that the sector’s awareness and use of its own history can be improved. Innovations to improve the ability of humanitarian workers to access the large and growing literature on
humanitarian history will be a critical part of this process. Encouragement from those in leadership positions within the humanitarian sector, such as the statement by Baroness Amos cited at the beginning of this article, for the sector to better appreciate its own history will also be necessary in changing attitudes towards history within the sector. However, it is also important that historians themselves recognise their own role in helping the sector to become more historically aware by engaging with agencies and better understanding their interests and concerns.

As Davey et al. state:

A better understanding of the past will help ensure a humanitarian system that is more self-aware, clearer about its identity and better prepared for engagement with the world in which it operates.47

Notes

1. Baudendistel, Between Bombs and Good Intentions: The Red Cross and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1936.
2. Amos, “Foreword.”
3. Walker and Maxwell, Shaping the Humanitarian World.
4. Davey, “An Introduction to the History of the Humanitarian System,” 1.
5. De Waal, Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984–1985.
6. Marfleet, “Refugees and History: Why we Must Address the Past.”
7. Valid International, Disasters Emergency Committee – East Africa Crisis Appeal: Ethiopia Real-Time Evaluation Report.
8. Humanitarian Negotiations Information Portal.
9. Barnett, Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism, 8.
10. MSF, MSF Speaking Out.
11. Rift Valley Institute, “Sudan Open Archive.”
12. Shortly after it was established in 1997 ALNAP – the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action – established an Evaluative Reports Database (ERD) to facilitate information-sharing and lesson-learning among humanitarian organisations. The ERD has grown steadily and now contains over 1100 documents evaluating or reviewing humanitarian operations over the last two decades. For historians focusing on the more recent past, the ERD represents a rich source of material: ALNAP, “Evaluative Reports Database.”
13. How the humanitarian sector is defined and delimited is the subject of debate. Some prefer the term “system” over “sector.” For the purposes of this paper I use the definition of international humanitarian system as used by the ALNAP’s State of the Humanitarian System reports which defines the system as “the network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian assistance is provided when local and national resources are insufficient to meet the needs of a population in crisis.” Taylor et al., The State of the Humanitarian System.
14. GHA, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015.
15. Taylor et al., The State of the Humanitarian System.
16. GHA, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015.
17. GHA, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015.
18. Walker and Pepper, Follow the Money, 9.
19. Taylor et al., The State of the Humanitarian System.
20. “Eligible Costs” DG ECHO Partners Website http://dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu/eligibility/eligible_costs/start.
21. Thompson, “The End of Children’s Aid Direct.”
22. Boyes-Watson, “Managing our Relationship with Institutional Donors.”
23. Borton et al., “Study 3 Humanitarian Aid and Effects”; Telford and Cosgrave, Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami: Synthesis Report.
24. Inter-Agency Standing Committee, “Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Haiti.”
25. Fast, Aid in Danger.
26. Stoddard et al., Aid Worker Security Report 2014.
27. Fawcett, Stress and Trauma Handbook: Strategies for Flourishing in Demanding Environments, 6.
28. Curling and Simmons, “Stress and Staff Support Strategies for International Aid Work.”
29. Lopes Cardozo, “Psychological Distress, Depression, Anxiety, and Burnout among International Humanitarian Aid Workers.”
30. Loquercio et al., “Understanding and Addressing Staff Turnover in Humanitarian Agencies.”
31. Loquercio et al., “Understanding and Addressing Staff Turnover in Humanitarian Agencies.”
32. Ross, Journalists & Humanitarian Relief Coverage.
33. Lewis, “International Development and the ‘Perpetual Present’.”
34. For an examination of the everyday lives of humanitarian personnel see Fechter and Hindman, Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Workers and Roth, The Paradoxes of Aid Workers.
35. Barnett, “Evolution Without Progress?”
36. The large number of articles published in Disasters reflect in part the fact that it is an ODI house journal to which we have free access and is therefore disproportionately represented in our personal EndNote libraries. Nevertheless, as the leading multidisciplinary journal of disaster studies that began publication in 1977 it would have been expected to have had the highest number of articles.
37. Linking historical place names to present-day place names is a simple way of making the past more accessible to present-day humanitarians.
38. It is interesting to reflect at this point that in the field of humanitarian evaluation the most widely used methodology is that Utilisation-Focused Evaluation, an approach developed and championed by Michael Quinn Patton since the 1980s whose key book is now in its fourth edition. Patton, Utilization-Focussed Evaluation. In the words of the ALNAP Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Pilot Guide: “A utilisation-focused evaluation is done with the intended primary users in mind, for specific, declared, practical uses. When planning an evaluation, it is essential to identify the intended users at the start and to help them decide what they want to achieve with it. If this has not been done by the time an evaluation team is appointed, which is often the case, then the team needs to do it. To be most effective, this should involve repeated interactions between the users and the team. User goals should guide the choice of approach and methods, which should also take into account constraints such as limits to time and resources. The utilisation focus and collaboration with primary users should continue to guide the evaluation process from planning through implementation. This way of thinking and working requires commitment and time.” ALNAP, Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Pilot Guide, 29.
39. University of Birmingham Cadbury Research Library Special Collections, XSCF Save the Children Fund Archive http://calmview.bham.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView. Catalog&id=XSCF.
40. Bodleian Library and Radcliffe Camera Cataloguing the Oxfam Archive http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/finding-resources/special/projects/saving-oxford-medicine/cataloguing-the-oxfam-archive
41. Green, “Humanitarianism in Nineteenth-Century Context.”
42. Smith, Ward, and House, “‘Impact’ in the Proposals for the UK’s Research Excellence Framework: Shifting the Boundaries of Academic Autonomy.”
43. Durose et al., “Towards Co-Production in Research with Communities.”
44. Non State Humanitarianism: http://nonstatehumanitarianism.com/
45. Davey et al., “An Introduction to the History of the Humanitarian System.”
46. HPG Annual Report April 2013 – March 2014.
47. Davey et al., “An Introduction to the History of the Humanitarian System.”
Notes on contributor

John Nicholas Borton has worked within the international humanitarian sector since 1981 in a variety of operational, evaluation, research and capacity-development roles. During his 11 years as a Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute (1991–2002) he played a leadership role in: the establishment of what is now the Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN); the Study 3 team of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda; and the establishment and early operation of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP).

Since moving to a freelance role in 2002, John supported the governance and staff of a large NGO programme in Darfur over the period 2004–13. He has a strong interest in making the history of humanitarian action more accessible and better understood and used by present-day humanitarian workers and their agencies. He holds the position of Senior Research Associate with the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute in London (ODI) and Honorary Lecturer at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) at the University of Manchester.

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