



Humanitarian Urbanism: Cities, Technology, and the Hybrid Practices of Humanitarian Planners

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***Humanitarian Urbanism:
Cities, Technology, and the Hybrid Practices of Humanitarian Planners***

A dissertation presented

by

Marianne F. Potvin

to

The Department of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Humanitarian Urbanism: Cities, Technology, and the Hybrid Practices of Humanitarian Planners

Abstract

This doctoral dissertation examines the largely untheorized relationship between global humanitarian action and the politics of urban planning using an approach that combines history and material theory, particularly Science Technology and Society Studies (STS). Through a review of technical and spatial planning instruments – field handbooks, refugee settlement policies and crisis mapping software – the research documents the shifting integration of urban and environmental policies into humanitarian mandates to protect the life and dignity of refugees and victims of conflict, from the 1960s through the present. Using a socio-technical imaginary framework, it investigates how the values of influential international humanitarian organizations (e.g. neutrality, independence, volunteerism) intersect with the norms of spatial planning.

Offering an alternative to the literature on humanitarian encampment, particularly the camp-to-city binary, this research highlights the interplay between moral and scientific rationality that exists within aid institutions, and attends to questions of expertise and legitimacy. It argues that humanitarian urbanism plays a crucial yet paradoxical role in aid agencies' quest for political legitimacy and moral accountability. On one hand, spatial practices have been marginalized as inferior to political or legal ones; on the other hand, there has been a desire that spatial “fixes” solve even the thorniest of ethical conundrums. It finds however that both technological and legal repertoires work towards the display, stabilization and extension of humanitarian neutrality. The research opens a critique of the conventional categories used both in urban and humanitarian studies. It allows for a reevaluation of urban practices in humanitarian contexts, and provides an analytical blueprint for the study of other humanitarian technical assemblages, which are bound to multiply in the years to come.

The findings are relevant to debates about urbanization, technology, forced migration, spatial justice, urban disaster and recovery, and digital philanthropy. They rely on multi-sited institutional ethnography, participant observations, archival research, and interviews conducted in French and English at the headquarters and field offices of international humanitarian organizations, primarily the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in Switzerland, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Copyright	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of illustrations	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Prologue: The Empirical Present	1
Chapter 1 Introduction	4
Chapter 2 Beyond the Camp Fetish	28
Chapter 3 Instruments and Socio-technical imaginaries of Aid (Conceptual Framework) 53	
Chapter 4 Humanitarian Planners in the “Century of the Unsettled Man”	78
Chapter 5 Smart Salvation: Crisis Mapping and The Return of Place	113
Chapter 6 Conclusion	150
Illustrations	159
Bibliography	170

List of illustrations

Figure 1 - Diagram of Analytical Framework 59

Figure 2 - Sample of UNHCR Manuals, Guidelines and Policies Related to Settlement Planning (compiled by the author) 66

Figure 2 - The Socio-technical imaginaries of humanitarian urbanism 76

Figure 4 - Heat map of registered Syrian Refugee as of October 31, 2014.....158

Figure 5 - “Where Syrians Find Their Refuge.”159

Figure 6 - “The Flight of Refugee Around the World”160

Figure 7 - The Dadaab Refugee Camps Garissa County, Kenya Cartographic Office,.....161

Figure 8 - Geospatial analytics of humanitarian conditions in Aleppo (2013).....162

Figure 9 - Geospatial analytics of humanitarian conditions in Aleppo (2013).....163

Figure 10 - Map of "Alternative Water Network"164

Figure 11 - Secondary and Tertiary Movements of Syrian Refugee Households.165

Figure 12 - Syrian Refugee Households Living Out-of-Camp.166

Figure 13 - Secondary and Tertiary Movements of Syrian Refugee Households.167

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Prologue: The Empirical Present

Over the course of researching and writing this dissertation (2013-2019), the refugee population under humanitarian protection nearly doubled. In July 2019, there are 70.8 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide under UNHCR mandate, a figure that includes refugees, internationally displaced persons (IPDs), and asylum seekers. Humanitarian statistics, which have gotten drastically more refined over the course of the last decade, show that refugees rarely return home. Instead, 78% of them remain in their country of refuge, living in what are called ‘protracted refugee situations’.¹ The urbanization rate of these groups is said to reflect the global trends, which means that most refugees are now mostly settled in urban areas, and live in what UNHCR calls “out-of-camp” accommodations.² Even if the ability to capture differences in refugee location or settlement types (for example in-camp versus out-of-camp) is only a recent feature of humanitarian statistics, the trends do point upwards. Everything seems to suggest that as the world urbanizes, so too does the humanitarian project.

But what does the so called ‘urban age’ mean for humanitarian action?

¹ A protracted situation refers to exile for five or more consecutive year in a given host country. A large majority of protracted situations last for more than 10 years, and many for more than 20. Afghan refugees living in Iran or Pakistan have been living in exile for 40 years.

² UNHCR, “UNHCR Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2018” (Geneva, Switzerland), 22 & 56–62, accessed June 23, 2019. A word of caution: because capturing humanitarian data is logistically and politically arduous, all the above figures need to be understood as impressionistic at best.

In humanitarian policy and practice, global urbanization is posed as a primarily operational concern: the delivery of aid is becoming harder because conflicts and disasters, and consequently humanitarian interventions, are increasingly occurring in urban operational settings, i.e. densely populated, densely built, socially heterogeneous agglomerations.

The Haiti Earthquake of January 2010 has been recently cited as the watershed moment that led to a fuller recognition of the “urban problem” in aid. For many, it exposed the extent of destruction that can occur when natural disasters strike cities, and was a wake-up call of sorts for humanitarian experts, who suddenly noticed the dearth of architects and urbanists in their ranks.

In parallel, an increase in urban warfare has led humanitarian experts to reconsider the adequacy of their instruments for protecting the lives of civilians trapped in cities under siege³. Let us recall that International Humanitarian Law (IHL) strictly prohibits the targeting of civilians and the destruction of vital infrastructure. But in Gaza, Aleppo, or Mosul, to name just a few ‘conflict cities’, it has been arduous for belligerents to distinguish combatants from non-combatants, as well as decide which urban infrastructures isn’t vital enough as to not warrant protection. What is more, it would appear that protracted conflict and urban growth are no longer mutually exclusive. The exponential growth of Kabul, whose population jumped from 1.5 million to 6 million in the decade that followed the toppling of the Taliban regime (2001-2012), is evidence that urban development occurs not after *but in the midst of* conflict.

³ Discussion Panel at Harvard Law School, September 22nd, 2014. “Gaza, International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights”, with Duncan Kennedy, Naz Modirzadeh, Jennifer Leaning and Bonnie Docherty.

From the perspective of relief delivery, humanitarian actors are confronted with projects that defy their level of technological expertise. In order to manage camps that have reached the size of large cities, or to restore essential city-wide infrastructure such as power plants or water treatment centers, humanitarians must grapple with large scale urban and infrastructural projects. When intervening in existing cities, humanitarian organizations struggle to choose between helping only the individuals whose particular status is protected under international norms and regulations – those who are traditionally deemed ‘deserving’ of international protection – or including the wide spectrum of urban poor, marginalized urban communities, or, more complicated yet, groups of economic, climate or environmental migrants flocking to cities. Humanitarian experts must also decide between ad-hoc fixes designed to meet acute emergency needs or long-lasting interventions that might respond to chronic needs: for example, deciding between funding water-trucking to urban neighborhoods or restoring water distribution infrastructure for hundreds of thousands of residents; or choosing between distributing tents or building permanent homes.

Finally, humanitarian actors are not only *coming up against* these disparate geographies of aid, they are *actively shaping* them. In several fragile areas, the prolonged presence of humanitarian organizations has given rise to what some have termed ‘NGOpoles,’ regions whose local economies are intrinsically tied to the aid industry, and whose landscapes are transformed by it, such as Aceh in post-Tsunami Indonesia, or Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁴

⁴ Karen Büscher and Koen Vlassenroot, “Humanitarian Presence and Urban Development: New Opportunities and Contrasts in Goma, DRC,” *Disasters* 34, no. s2 (2010): S256–S273; Koen Vlassenroot and Karen Büscher, “Borderlands, Identity and Urban Development: The Case of Goma (Democratic Republic of the Congo),” *Urban Studies* 50, no. 15 (November 1, 2013): 3168–84.

Chapter 1 Introduction

This dissertation is about the spatial expertise – the spatial practices and the spatial knowledge – of international humanitarian actors. It is about how international humanitarian organizations have conceived questions of urbanism, architecture, and their interventions on the built environment writ large. It is about how they have both rejected (mostly) and integrated (sometimes, and often reluctantly) spatial interventions as a mode and an object of action, and as a way to see the world and their place in it. More precisely, and to use an architectural metaphor, it focuses less on the built *form* (or on specific spatial morphologies) and more on the *plans* – the conceptual, navigational instruments that orchestrate and organize the production of humanitarian spatiality. Humanitarian technical plans, however, are rarely drawn, as this research shows; rather, they are contained in instruments such as technical repositories of best practices and minimal standards, in field handbooks and manuals, and in hybrids operational documents that circulate across crises, places and times, extending the reach of the experts who created them.

1.1 Problem and definitions

What I call “Humanitarian urbanism” refers to the spatial practices and spatial knowledges of the agencies, organizations, and other actors who constitute the institutionalized international humanitarian field.

I use the term “humanitarian” to refer rather narrowly to the institutionalized international humanitarian aid sector – the loosely connected system of international agencies and non-

governmental organizations devoted to responding to needs in situations of conflict, natural disasters or forced displacement. The legitimacy of the humanitarian field is anchored in principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. Broadly speaking, impartiality refers to the refusal to discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions, and the pledge to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs. Neutrality and independence refer to a refusal to engage in activities of political, racial, religious or ideological nature, and to maintaining a strict separation and autonomy from State action.¹ This research will argue that the ways in which impartiality, neutrality and independence get constructed changes all the time – sometime it occurs in opposition to technical and scientific authority, sometime in close association with it.

In contrast, I use the term “urbanism” in its broadest sense to refer to the wide range of theoretical discourses, professional practices, ideologies, and interpretations that are concerned with the organization, layout or arrangement, of territories inhabited and shaped by humans, in their economic, political, cultural and ecological dimensions. Urbanism can also be defined as the “science and theory of human settlement,”² as philosopher and historian Françoise Choay put it in the 1970s, not without expressing deep skepticism for the “scientific” aspirations of the field. Some would argue that there is an important distinction to be made between the notion of “urbanism” (connoting more strongly the critical, socially and politically reflexive dimensions of this area of knowledge), and the American and Anglo-Saxon terminology of “urban planning” or “city

¹ “Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement,” May 12, 2016.

² Françoise Choay, *L’urbanisme, utopies et réalités : une anthologie*. (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1965).

planning” (connoting somewhat more narrowly its professional, practical and scientific aspects). Since this research is interested in both expertise and discourse, I choose not to dwell too long on the nuance of the urbanism versus city-planning nomenclatures, and I generally retain the term urbanism for its dual sense.

It is crucial however to specify that my understanding of the notion of “urban” aligns with the contemporary critical urban scholarship that recognizes the profound limitations of inherited approaches to urban questions (or, more reverentially, to *the* Urban Question). This scholarship seeks to redefine the accepted categories of urban investigation, and to study the urban in terms of sociospatial processes rather than merely urban forms, rejecting the idea that the urban is a distinct “type of territory that could be defined in opposition to other ... territories that lay ... outside its boundaries.”³

In light of this theoretical inclination, the notion of Humanitarian Urbanism proposed here can thus be reframed as the sum of processes of spatial development that emerge from humanitarian action, at various scales and sites, through different strategies, involving “institutional arrangements, political strategies, spatial ideologies, power relationships”⁴ and expertise that are specific to humanitarian action. In keeping with the dual meaning of urbanism, the notion of Humanitarian Urbanism can also be understood as the (experimental) interpretative lens that might

³ Neil Brenner, *New Urban Spaces: Urban Theory and the Scale Question* (Oxford: University Press USA - OSO, 2019), 3.

⁴ Ibid. See Introduction, 3.

help illuminate such processes. The implications of this approach are discussed in further details in Chapter 6.

1.1.1 “*Humanitarian Urbanism*”, a contradiction in terms?

At first glance, from a practical perspective, the logics that conventionally define humanitarian action seem intrinsically incompatible with those that define urban practices. Humanitarian action is defined by the urgency of the present; whereas planning incorporates the past and anticipates the future. Humanitarian experts are transnational, highly mobile actors, who aim to be universal, neutral, impartial, and independent from state action (whether at local or national levels). In contrast, planners are thought to be locally and politically rooted.

What is more, none of the epistemic categories of urban theory has ever really matched those of humanitarianism. As was just mentioned, mainstream approaches in urban theory have usually presupposed human settlements that are fixed, stable and bounded, both politically and spatially. Such approaches usually rest on binaries such as rural/urban; city/countryside; permanent/temporary; industrial/agrarian; growth/decline; metropole/colony; society/nature; East/West; North/South; (the camp/city binary, which will be discussed in Chapter 2, can be considered another such instantiation). Urban planning has also been generally thought to be a state-led endeavor, and as such, deeply embedded in projects of state development and long-term growth. The complex temporalities, geographies, politics, cosmopolitanisms of humanitarian spatiality and humanitarian spatial practices defy most, if not all, of these inherited frameworks.

From both the practical and the epistemic angles, in sum, it would appear that the notion of *humanitarian urbanism* is a contradiction in terms. Yet it exists. How, then, are we to think coherently about the convergence about urbanization and humanitarian action?

1.2 Research Questions

This dissertation asks the following questions. What is the role of urban expertise in the construction of humanitarian legitimacy? How have international humanitarian organizations approached questions of human settlements and spatial planning over time? When and why have international humanitarian organizations engaged with, or shunned, the larger issue of urbanization? Which technical knowledge, practices and tools have underpinned their interventions? How have scientific and technical rationality contributed to the (real or perceived) solidity of humanitarian constructs? In an ethos so fixated on moral and ethical codes, how have technical ones fared? Finally, what might this mean for the future of international humanitarian aid? How might the lens of humanitarian urbanism inform a framework to help humanitarian organizations go from protecting individual lives to creating inclusive and just cities?

1.3 Theoretical orientation

Starting from the premise that inherited tools of urban theory are ill-suited to describe let alone explain humanitarian urbanism, I adopt an eclectic, heterodox theoretical approach that combines

concepts and methods from two adjacent intellectual traditions: science, technology and society studies (STS) and history.

1.3.1 *Agency of material systems (via STS)*

Humanitarian urbanism involves three key dimensions: 1) the heterogeneity and diversity of humanitarian geographies or humanitarian spaces, and of how spatial problems are conceived; 2) the coalescence of a distinctive humanitarian instrumentality around more or less advanced types of scientific tools and expertise; and 3) the persistent contestation of humanitarian legitimacy and humanitarian power. Studying humanitarian urbanism requires a theoretical framework capable of weaving these three aspects together. Science Technology and Society studies (STS) offer several ways to do so. Amongst other things, STS attends to questions of material systems and their agency; that is, it takes seriously materiality and technical rationality as powerful forces shaping the social world, opening up possibilities of explaining the constitution of humanitarian action through its material dimension. STS also provides tools to study the coproduction of humanitarian expertise and power. This includes interrogations on the constitution of professional fields, performance and display of authority through specific professional discourses and technologies of governance.

I will focus particularly on the framework of **sociotechnical imaginaries** – which is common to both STS and architectural and infrastructural studies. Framing humanitarian urbanism in these terms brings to light the co-constitutive relationship between technological expertise, scientific validity, moral authority, and political legitimacy within humanitarian aid organizations. The idea of imaginary also corresponds to my focus on problems of conception and projectivity.

Instruments, understood broadly as material devices that both reveal and shape humanitarian values, are used as the primary unit of analysis, my primary “empirical data” so to speak.

1.3.2 *History*

Since I view humanitarian urbanism as the study of processes that occur over time, across distinct sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts, I also adopt a historical approach. It is a well-established assumption, within the discipline of history, and particularly history of science, that the technical is deeply political. History differs in this way from the more polarized urbanistic field, which, as mentioned, tends to alternate between views that either too scientifically deterministic or attached to meta-narratives of social dynamics too far removed from empirical reality.

Since my study deals with *the institutionalization of* urban practice and urban knowledge, it seems appropriate to understand this institutionalization as occurring dynamically, over time, through moments of emergence, embedding, resistance, and extension.⁵

Furthermore, it is widely recognized in both the academic and the professional spheres that humanitarian history is a severely neglected topic. This neglect of not only the past but of *time* itself can be attributed to humanitarians’ unrelenting insistence on urgency, immediacy and the imperative of the present. Labelled a “historical deferment,”⁶ the phenomenon is scrutinized by a

⁵ This is an echo to Sheila Jasanoff’s four key dynamic moments of co-production, when something gets “produced, disseminated, controlled and challenged.”

⁶ Craig Calhoun.

growing number of humanitarian historians.⁷ Craig Calhoun believes that this a way for humanitarian actors to preserve an ethos of value rationality over and above instrumental rationality.⁸ In other words, as Calhoun would have it, historical deferment is a way for humanitarians to ensure their “autonomy from the pursuit of solutions by means of economic transformation,”⁹ by insisting on the here and now. Following from Calhoun, we could thus say that adopting a historical lens is a way to bring back the problem of instrumental rationality into the conversation.

When it comes to humanitarian urbanism, I hypothesize that because the camp is the model, and because the model is thought to be a-historical and anti-urban (in the conventional sense of the word ‘urban’), humanitarian urbanism as a whole has not been historicized. Doing a historical study of the development on planning expertise within humanitarian institutions can reveal the richness of the spatial models used in humanitarian responses, while also contributing to humanitarian history. A historical perspective – particularly if it unearths forgotten episodes – could be useful to inform how present-day decision-makers may think about the “newness” of the problems they face. Indeed, the so-called urbanization of aid is currently represented in humanitarian media as a new phenomenon. As this project will show, it is not the case: the controversy might still be of acute relevance today, but it is far from new.

⁷ See 2.4 for a more in-depth discussion on the emerging historiographies of humanitarian aid.

⁸ In other words, Calhoun argues that the ethos of humanitarian action is “doing what is good in itself, not what is good for some other purpose.” These “other purposes,” for instance political and social emancipation or economic development, can only be measured across time. Craig Calhoun, “The Idea of Emergency: Humanitarian Action and Global (Dis)Order,” in *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, by Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (New York: Zone Books ; Cambridge, Mass, 2010), 29–58.

⁹ Craig Calhoun, “The Idea of Emergency”, 52.

This historical period covered here starts in the aftermath of the second World War and ends with the present, insisting on two moments when urbanization takes central stage in discussion of international aid: the articulation of an official position on the urban question for the first time in 1970s-1980s, and the emergence of a spatial intelligence discourse in the present.

1.4 Methods

My methods are qualitative and rely primarily on archival and bibliographic research, as well as on multi-sited institutional ethnography of humanitarian organizations and networks, and participant observations in professional humanitarian settings. The following section provides details on how the data was assembled, starting with a discussion of the logistical and philosophical hurdles encountered while doing so.

1.4.1 Categorical discord

Before describing my data collection in more detail, it is important to underline the challenges that one faces in navigating humanitarian organizations' archives in search for traces of their urbanistic practices. A first major hurdle is the absence of technical (let alone an urban or a physical planning) categories in the humanitarian repertoire, particularly the early one. This corresponds to what Anooradha Siddiqi sums up as *the missing epistemological scaffold of the institutionalization of*

*architectural and planning practice in the history of humanitarian relief.*¹⁰ This absence (or voluntary omission, as will be discussed shortly) is all at once a logistical, methodological and an ontological hurdle that goes right at the heart of this dissertation.

This was manifest in my archives, which primarily included the archives of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). For instance, a review of the “Thematic Compilation of the UNHCR Executive Committee Conclusions”, including its 7th and latest edition dated June 2014, reveals that infrastructure, settlement, physical or urban planning, or urbanization were never organizational themes for UNHCR. For the UNHCR in particular, the word “settlement” seems to have been confusing in and of itself – referring to a protection status (of a refugee being positively and permanently settled in a host country) rather than to sites, dwellings or physical entities.

A review of ICRC’s annual reports and archives corroborates this finding. Very early in the constitution of institutionalized humanitarian aid, Jean Pictet, a Swiss jurist renowned for his work on drafting the Geneva Conventions and the seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross Movement, drew a line in the sand between legal protection and technical protection, equating the latter with material measures, writing in 1939:

“Ces notes n'envisagent que la protection juridique de la population civile et non sa protection technique, c'est-à-dire les mesures matérielles que l'on peut prendre pour la préserver (construction d'abris, distribution d'équipements spéciaux, dispersion de la population urbaine à la campagne, etc.).”

¹⁰ Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, “Architecture Culture, Humanitarian Expertise: From the Tropics to Shelter, 1953–93,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 3 (September 1, 2017): 367.

Moreover, there is a view, particularly acute in Red Cross brands of humanitarianism, that material relief is distortion or dilution of the meaning and power of humanitarian principles,¹¹ which has permeated the organizational culture. My archival research as well as well as my examination of outward facing publications such as annual reports show that until the 1960s and 1970s, most humanitarian documents, did not qualify the nature of ICRC's technical activities beyond these broad categories of "protection" and "assistance." With "Protection" referring to the promotion of moral and legal frameworks; and "assistance" engulfing all relief work separate from "protection", such as food distribution, drillings of wells, construction of water distribution networks, medical first aid – basically all the materiality of its operations. In French, assistance is also often called 'relief' ('secours') as opposed to 'protection'; in 1970s ICRC, a relief delegate ('délégué secours') would have been expected to be able to perform any and each of the different tasks listed above. This means that planning practices were either made invisible or subsumed under the large and amorphous rubric of "assistance"¹² until the 1980s at the very least.

¹¹ Hugo Slim, amongst others, sees aid based only on material relief as a distortion of the Humanity principle – one of the seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross Movement. He views it as a heresy that "caricatures humanitarianism as an essentially materialistic concern for physical welfare, manifested in the provision of a range of commodities such as food, water, shelter, and medicine. This commodification of humanitarianism and its subsequent reduction to a package of 'humanitarian assistance' is a serious heresy which undermines wider humanitarian values. To interpret humanitarianism as an essentially minimalist endeavor relating to simple human survival is a misreading of its first principle. The Geneva Conventions are full of civil and political rights, as well as rights relating to simple physical survival. Restricting humanitarian concerns to relief commodities precludes many other vital aspects of the Geneva Conventions which relate to ... notions of liberty and happiness." Hugo Slim, "Relief Agencies and Moral Standing in War: Principles of Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality and Solidarity I," *Development in Practice* 7, no. 4 (November 1, 1997): 345.

¹² See various archives of operational and human resources taxonomies at ICRC. In the 1960s-1970s, relief is synonymous with assistance. Later, relief becomes a sub-set of assistance. I am insisting simply to support my argument that assistance is primarily defined in opposition to "protection," it contains all that is NOT legal protection.

While my investigations revealed little coherent documentation of technical conversations or evaluations, they nonetheless indicated that the practices of planning, construction and management of humanitarian settlements existed despite the absence of operational categories such “Physical Planning,” “Shelter” or even “Settlements,” and often before the creation of standards, norms and communities of knowledge about these practices.¹³

Because my goal was to trace the *institutionalization* of a practice and expertise *within the field*, I chose to track information that had either circulated at the headquarters or been discussed in higher decision-making centers. At UNHCR, I therefore chose to explore the registry of UNHCR headquarter (and also the biggest registry in UNHCR archives).¹⁴ Within that registry, I prioritized files devoted to assistance activities, where I explored the entirety of the sub-group on the Technical Specialist Support Unit. I also searched the Intergovernmental Organizations files, the Public Information files, as well as the General Information files.¹⁵ The same approach was not possible at the ICRC, where the archival structure did not provide a central (nor or even a constellation of) focal point(s) to collect documents relevant to technical or material assistance. At ICRC, conversations with archivists indicated that the lack of a technical category might be due to

¹³ This finding is corroborated by Eleanor Davey et al., in *A History of the Humanitarian System: Western Origins and Foundations* (London: Overseas Development Institute Humanitarian Policy Group, 2013), 32, <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8439.pdf>.

¹⁴ This corresponds to Fonds 11. Another choice would have been to explore the files of all distinct country-specific operations; an enormous endeavor which could have only worked had I chosen a geographical focus.

¹⁵ Assistance activities are covered in file numbers 500-598; the Technical Specialist Support Unit in file numbers 590-598; the Intergovernmental Organizations files – including material related to the Habitat conference – in file numbers 300-391; the Public Information files in file numbers 800-899; the General Information files in file numbers 001-0xx.

the fact that the ICRC organizational culture has generally favored ‘individual initiative’ over the regularization of a given practice.¹⁶ In addition, as it regards planning or architectural interventions specifically, it appeared that most of what had gotten *built*, including large settlements or elaborate infrastructures such as entire water treatment plants, had been buried with needles, blankets and jerry cans under the generic label of “relief”.¹⁷

1.4.2 *Humanitarian archives as political strategy*

Beyond the problem of categories, there are other hurdles to writing a history of humanitarian planning. A problem that is often invoked is the difficulty of accessing documentary evidence because data is destroyed in conflict, abandoned in emergency, or lack the material durability to survive.¹⁸ But, the destruction of archival material is not only accidental; it can also be systematic, intentional or political.

According to humanitarian historian Davide Rodogno, the fragmented state of humanitarian archives can result from specific (although not necessarily explicit or intentional) politics of memory (“politiques mémorielles”) practiced by several humanitarian institutions, many of which

¹⁶ Interview with ICRC chief archivist, Fabrizio Bensi.

¹⁷ Interview with ICRC chief archivist, Fabrizio Bensi. See also Yves Bodmer and Jean-Charles Rey, *Analyse de Certains Aspects de La Culture Du CICR: L'idéologie de l'exceptionnel: Avantage Ou Inconvénient ?* (Genève: s.n, 1993).

¹⁸ Ibid.

embrace a politics of forgetting rather than of remembrance (“politiques de l’oubli”),¹⁹ which differs from the will of humanitarian organizations to restrict access to their records for privacy and confidentiality reasons. For Rodogno, humanitarian archives are asymmetrical, divided between accounts of the “works that need to be done,” used to convince funders and donors to give to the institutions, and accounts of “work that has been done,” which highlights the institution’s successes and omits its failures.

This is a skewed perspective because it narrates success stories through ... the lives and agency of the “saved” [who] get visibly tied to the humanitarians while in reality their course is usually different from those stories. The category of the “saved” is created through the concepts of “saviors” and of their essential “goodness”, while many persons are forgotten and concealed, deliberately or not, including the whole category of people who have not been saved.²⁰

The humanitarian narrative orientation towards the ‘saviors’ (albeit indirectly through the stories of the saved), obfuscates what is left outside the ‘savior’s’ action, or what occurs after. What is more – according to Rodogno still – the victim (or the person who is saved) is instrumentalized and rendered abstract in favor of the institution’s own storytelling.

L’archive de l’institution humanitaire devient un container de mémoires assez particulier ; on voit de moins en moins l’existence d’individus dans le besoin ; en revanche on voit et on lit des chiffres, des statistiques (...) *Finale*ment, l’archive de l’institution humanitaire parle de l’institution plus que de toute autre chose et instrumentalise, au point de le faire quasiment disparaître, l’individu en détresse qui devient la « victime » sans nom.²¹

¹⁹ Davide Rodogno's chapter, “Naufragés et rescapés, fantômes et statues, oubliés et oublis dans les archives des institutions humanitaires,” 2018, provides a lucid and rich analysis of the role of the archives within humanitarian institutions.

²⁰ Davide Rodogno, “The Lapses of Humanitarian Archives,” *Graduate Institute of Geneva* (blog), May 14, 2019.

²¹ Rodogno, “Naufragés et rescapés” 2018, 252. Emphasis added.

Now, how does that relate to humanitarian urbanism? Drawing on Rodogno, one might contend that humanitarian archives choose to forget how the “saving” occurs concretely (even *materially*), and erase traces of the complexity and contradictions left behind by humanitarian spatial projects. The absence of the planning category might thus be linked to the politics of forgetting that Rodogno speaks of. It could be that it is because humanitarian spatial interventions shatter the illusion of temporariness so important to the humanitarian ethos that they are left out of the archives, or buried so deep in them, they become impossible to approach coherently.

Just like the ghosts of the victims that were not saved by the humanitarians, I believe that humanitarian planners and humanitarian technicians lurk in the shadow of humanitarian archives. Of course, the risk for the researcher is thus “to pretend to find things that are invisible” in the archives.²² But it is, in my view, a risk worth taking.

1.4.3 *The Data Set*

My data set consists of technical standards, handbooks, policy memos, field mission reports and other internal correspondence produced and circulated by relief actors in relation to their physical settlements, housing or shelter design, urban and environmental questions, since the 1950s. More specifically, they consist of: 1) internal communications, memos, drafts of conference elocutions, working copies of conference proceedings; 2) field mission reports, internal evaluation reports

²² Davide Rodogno, “The Lapses of Humanitarian Archives,” *Graduate Institute of Geneva* (blog), May 14, 2019; Davide Rodogno, “Naufragés et rescapés, fantômes et statues, oubliés et oublis dans les archives des institutions humanitaires,” 2018, 14.

(produced by internal experts or external experts, but restricted to internal circulation); 3) published manuals; handbooks and sets of technical or engineering standards (both outward facing, inward facing); 4) organigrams, administrative structure, human resources documents; and 5) knowledge sharing platforms, internal and inter-agency coordination models.

I triangulate between archival material, institutional records, digital repositories of public facing media, and semi structured and unstructured interviews with current practitioners. While collections include both “global” and more regionally specific material, I initially tried to focus as much as possible on material that covered global operations, or that was aimed at large-scale cross-continental, or at least cross-country circulation. Given the paucity of material found along the way, I ended up integrating regional or even locally targeted documents into my ‘data set’. Finally, I have resorted to secondary sources – especially institutional historiographies – to help me to corroborate historical facts and interpretations. For Chapter 5, I have also used published academic research on the technical processes involved in the treatment of geospatial data, due to the highly technical nature of the activities described.

1.4.4 *Archival research*

For my archival work, I have relied primarily on the archives of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). There are several reasons for this choice. First, these two humanitarian organizations are among the oldest, largest, most recognized and most influential organizations in the humanitarian field not only today, but

since the onset of institutionalized international humanitarianism.²³ While the ICRC and the UNHCR have distinct features and cultures (especially with regards to their relationships to states), both are oriented towards the protection of people affected by armed conflicts. Both are also inscribed in international law in ways that other humanitarian NGOs are not. Because of their status and long lifespans, they set the ‘industry standards’ in their field. For these reasons, and despite the obvious limitations of performing such a generalization, this study considers to be representative of the field as a whole.

There are also practical reasons for prioritizing these two organizations, including their scales of operations, as well as historical and global scopes; established in 1863 and 1950 respectively, the ICRC and UNHCR have longer record-keeping practices compared to the numerous NGOs created after the 1970s (although that does not necessarily mean better institutional memory, and deeper reflexivity on their own development). While this archival research is concentrated in these two institutions, the research does not pretend to offer a comparative analysis between the two institutions; rather it views the archives as very important signposts in a field that deals with

²³ Scholar of global institutions Thomas G. Weiss has called the ICRC and the UNHCR the “two gold standard” institutions in the humanitarian field (see foreword in Loescher et al., *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): The Politics and Practice of Refugee Protection into the Twenty-First Century*, Global Institutions Series ; 23 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), xii. See the work of Loescher for a history of UNHCR’s rise to prominence. In addition, see, amongst others, the work of historical sociologist Shai Dromi on the role of the Red Cross Movement (led by the ICRC) in the genesis of the field of humanitarian aid in the second half of the nineteenth century, in which Dromi uses a Bourdieusian historical sociological field analysis model to provide a “conjunctural mode of explanation” for the formation of the humanitarian social domain, its acceptance in society more broadly, and the dynamics of competition within it. Shai M. Dromi, “Soldiers of the Cross: Calvinism, Humanitarianism, and the Genesis of Social Fields,” *Sociological Theory* 34, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 196–219. For a more political scientific lens, see also Myriam Bradley’s comparative analysis of UNHCR and ICRC, in which she posits that ICRC and UNHCR “are arguably the two most important humanitarian agencies for protection, and both have protection at the heart of their mandates.” Miriam Bradley, *Protecting Civilians in War: The ICRC, UNHCR, and Their Limitations in Internal Armed Conflicts*, First edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

considerable complexity and diversity. It should also be noted that their archives include documentation of their relationships with other NGOs and other organizations. UNHCR, particularly, has for a very long time relied on NGOs to implement its technical programs, and thus kept traces of how it disseminated its practices and customs into the larger ecosystem of aid.

Other physical collections consulted include the ICRC and United Nations Office in Geneva (UNOG) libraries, where I looked at ICRC annual reports, the wider UN collections, as well as the UNHCR library collection, which used to be housed at the UNHCR Rue de Montbrillant Headquarters, but was transferred to the Palais des Nations over the last 10 to 15 years. Many UNHCR documents got lost, misplaced or mis-referenced during this move,²⁴ and this had an impact on my ability to find the documents that I initially sought.

Given the sensitive nature of humanitarian operations, it should also be noted that access to archival material was limited, at the time of research, to pre-1975 documents for ICRC, and pre-1997 documents for UNHCR²⁵. One noble exception is a collection of UNHCR technical mission reports which covered the 1982-2006 period, which had not been made public yet, and thus had remained unexplored.²⁶

²⁴ Interviews with UNHCR archivists and UNOG librarians in June 2017.

²⁵ UNHCR's public archives catalog is not searchable beyond 1985. For 1985-1997 records, I relied on a list provided by the archivist.

²⁶ This archival subset merits further exploration, and thus warrants the following note. As it was made available to me, the Technical Mission Reports List (Fonds 18. Records relating to assistance. Sous-fonds 2. General Technical Services. Series 1. Technical mission reports) covers the period from 1982 to 2006, and includes some digitized reports. This list was still a work in progress when I consulted it, and while the titles of the reports were available up to 2006, the digitized reports themselves (i.e. their contents) were not. I limited myself to consulting the reports related to questions of settlement planning in the 1982-1989 period.

1.4.5 Interviews and institutional ethnography

In addition to the ICRC and UN archives, I also looked at wider “communities of practice” within the international humanitarian ecosystem. These included, though were not restricted to, the secretariat of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), which has established itself as a skill-building, knowledge-sharing entity and a major repository of urban guidelines and toolkits, and the International Network of Crisis Mappers, an international community of experts, practitioners, policymakers, technologists, researchers, journalists, scholars, hackers and skilled volunteers engaged at the intersection of humanitarian crises, new technology, crowd-sourcing, and crisis mapping. I also visited the sites and online forums where crisis-mappers interact and volunteer, and subscribed to their newsletter.

Interviews with technical specialists and other humanitarian program managers were conducted in French and English at headquarters and field offices, in Beirut and Tyr (Lebanon), Kurdistan (Iraq), as well as Geneva (Switzerland), and Boston and New York. While I interviewed both “protection” professionals and managers, I focused as much as possible on interviewing technical specialists or people overseeing technical projects, particularly in the shelter, settlement, water and mapping sectors.

A note on participant observations

This research also draws on participant observations from my own time working as a “humanitarian planner” (as I self-describe it) in Eastern Chad (2008), Kabul, Afghanistan (April 2009 – July 2010) and in Erbil and Kirkuk, Iraq (May 2011- January 2012), an experience that

planted the seed for this doctoral work. As the manager of large-scale urban shelter and settlement project in Kabul, and later as a “Water and Habitat Engineer” in Iraqi Kurdistan, I oversaw technical teams as well as sat on strategic program development meetings, interfacing with local authorities as well as a various echelons of humanitarian managers. In my experience, the voices of technical experts (including but not limited to spatial experts) seemed to be somewhat muzzled by those of legal and political experts.²⁷ Both a blessing and a curse, my professional field experience ignited intuitions²⁸, and allowed me to roam sites to which access is usually restricted because they are either too remote, too dangerous, or too hostile to welcome passive academic ‘observers’. But my past embeddedness into humanitarian ‘missions’ as they are still called today, also left me with blind spots. This dissertation forced me to “unlearn” some of the professional training that I received, and some truths I held as self-evident.

1.5 Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is organized as follows. The first two chapters provide the intellectual framing for the project and situate its argument and analytical framework in scholarly traditions. The third and fourth chapters dive deeper into two case studies, which, taken together, sketch a chronology

²⁷ A memo found in the ICRC archives later confirmed what could have been merely a momentary professional frustration, and put it in rather bluntly: “At the ICRC, the political dominates the technical” (“au CICR, le politique domine le technique”). ICRC Archives. Date unknown, circa 1960s-1970s, with a reference to the principle adopted at Chexbres.

²⁸ The intuition to focus on handbooks and manuals instead of drawings or drawn plans came in part from these years of practice, where handbooks were both helpful in my technical work as well as used to “legitimize” my work to donors or colleagues. In other words, to put it crudely, referencing the “Sphere Standards” in a donor report was more credible than invoking my (licensed) architectural expertise.

of the evolution of spatial practices and spatial knowledge of humanitarian actors from the 1960s to the present. The concluding chapter discusses the implications for urban theory.

Chapter 2 covers the scarcely populated intersection between humanitarian and spatial or material studies. It argues that the study of humanitarian space has made a fetish of the refugee camp, with even the most critically inclined scholarship on humanitarian space taking the camp as the premise and end-all of humanitarian spatiality. This very restrictive and obsolete frame of reference has obscured a more complex understanding of spatial humanitarian practices as they developed over time, in the interstice between political, moral and technological reasons. Building on recent work on the materiality of humanitarian aid, and on the internal (institutional, professional, normative and cultural) characteristics of aid organizations, I argue for a study of the development of humanitarian planning expertise *from within*. Finally, I highlight the need for a historical approach, drawing on contemporary, prolific, work by historians of aid and development who do not “exceptionalize” humanitarianism but instead examine its processes of change and its myriad expressions.

Chapter 3 provides the conceptual and analytical framing of this work. It presents key analytical tools from Science Technology and Society Studies, such as socio-technical imaginary and co-production, and explains how they are used to illuminate the importance of planning instruments within humanitarian institutions. The chapter also excavates the position of technology and expertise within aid, particularly the links between humanitarian technology, humanitarian neutrality and humanitarian legitimacy. It provides a matrix summarizing the interplay between discourses of planning and discourses of neutrality.

Centered on UNHCR's participation in the Habitat Conference of 1976, **Chapter 4** traces the emergence of planning as a new area of concern for the international community, as well as the institutionalization of spatial practices and spatial expertise as a formal category of practice in the repertoire of international humanitarian organizations. It links this evolution to the emergence of urbanization and environmentality as developmental concerns in global governance circles in the late twentieth century.

The first part of the chapter begins with the geographical expansion of humanitarian action from Post-war Europe into the "Third World" in the 1960s. This expansion was accompanied by a rapid and massive shift from a humanitarian regime steeped in legal action to one based on material assistance and in-kind relief, which could be qualified as a *material turn*. Although physical planning remained absent as a formal category of practice, the 'material turn' gave rise to spatial practices aligned with development models and indicative of new levels of attention accorded to urban questions in global governance circles. The Vancouver Human Settlement Conference of 1976, which came to be known as the 'Habitat' conference, represented a pivotal moment during which humanitarian organizations came to realize that spatial policy and physical infrastructure was indeed crucial to their mandates to safeguard of the lives and dignity of war victims and refugees. The socio-technical imaginary of humanitarian planning became linked to holistic, integrative and longer views of social and environmental systems.

A second part of Chapter 4 contrasts the Habitat vision of humanitarian planning with the turn towards standardization and efficiency as the dominant socio-technical ideal of post-Cold War humanitarian urbanism. Far from being archetypal, perennial, and thus somewhat inescapable, the

camp and the shelter emerged as spatial models characteristic of these specific technological, geopolitical and ideological conditions.

Chapter 5 brings us to the present moment, and deals with a current point of convergence between humanitarianism and the science of cities: the reliance on spatial intelligence to plan humanitarian interventions. Crisis mapping and the use of geospatial localization tools for humanitarian relief are the focus of that case study. These tools participate in the creation and enactment of a new socio-technical imaginary for humanitarianism, which I call *the smart salvation imaginary*, and which triggers a new amalgamation of humanitarian values and technological ideals. Unlike in some prior socio-technical imaginaries, in the smart salvation imaginary, the merging of normative and technical repertoires is anything but tacit or antagonistic. Now more than ever, the humanitarian project to protect human dignity and human life is bolstered by technological codes that augment, if not surpass, moral ones. Borrowing insights from critical work on the smart city and digital navigation tools, the chapter focuses on two aspects of smart salvation. This first is the construction humanitarian neutrality through triangulation and algorithmic validation of data from a variety of sources and constituents, including vast networks of digital volunteers. The second point of focus is the way in which smart salvation equates localization of aid with democratization, confusing mapping imagery with deep knowledge and representations of places.

Chapter 6 concludes with some implication for urban theory. In part because of the uniquely theory-defiant, disintegrated ‘atomized’ nature of humanitarian spatiality (contemporary, but also past), and in part because of the complex relationship that humanitarian action entertains with states, the conclusion makes a case for a new framework for understanding humanitarian spatiality,

called Humanitarian Urbanism. Humanitarian Urbanism builds on important themes of critical urban theory, such as uneven development (taken to the extreme), splintered sovereignty, and planning without development. In addition to contributing to these themes, it proposes to bring the question of legitimacy of planning institutions to the fore.

Chapter 2 Beyond the Camp Fetish

Scholarship on the international humanitarian system has conventionally focused on legal and moral authority, overlooking the importance of material and technical rationality as powerful forces shaping humanitarian action. As a result, space is a rather neglected topic in humanitarian studies, and no comprehensive account of humanitarian spatiality exist. This chapter reviews existing scholarly approaches to the question of humanitarian space; it covers work on humanitarian camps, as well as work on the production of humanitarian space (construed in its sociological sense) in the traditions of Henry Lefebvre. It also touches on helpful Bourdieusian approaches to the socio-spatial practices of humanitarian institutions.

2.1 Humanitarian Space

2.1.1 *Space-Bound Neutrality*

When the concept of “humanitarian space” surfaces, it is generally to refer to a legal, an abstract rather than a physical, condition. In military or diplomatic parlance, “humanitarian space” refers to warring states’ responsibilities to uphold International Humanitarian Law (IHL) during armed conflicts (IHL is another name for the law of war, or for *jus in bello*, the law that governs the way in which warfare is conducted).¹ While this use of humanitarian space is not immediately material

¹ IHL seeks to limit the suffering caused by war, and includes the Geneva Conventions and The Hague Conventions, among others. It is independent from questions about the justification or reasons for going to or preventing war covered by *jus ad bellum*. It should be noted that most of IHL presupposes war between states, and that it is only recently that IHL also applies to internal conflicts (civil wars).

and physical, it does connote ‘space-bound circumstantial conditions’,² if only because it is underpinned by a Westphalian conception of state sovereignty, of which territorial jurisdiction, defined as “the rigidly mapped territories within which formally defined legal powers are exercised by formally organized governmental institutions,” is an essential feature.³

This cursory foray into the legal is non-trivial to our study of three-dimensional humanitarian space. For instance, until recently, respect for state sovereignty dictated the physical location of humanitarian operations *outside* the international borders of ‘perpetrator’ states. Moreover, the act of crossing a national border is a defining element for refugees, as it triggers their subsequent protection under refugee law, and even IHL (although IHL is not territorially triggered the same way Refugee Law is). For more than a century, painting the Red Cross or the Red Crescent emblem⁴ on a building rooftop, or hoisting it on a flag, has been enough to signal a protected space and thus suspend certain state activities from occurring within it, since the emblem is itself formally encoded in IHL. When located *inside* state borders, humanitarian spaces have tended to be enclaves of their own exceptional jurisdiction, and designed to leave only a light footprint (environmental, political) onto state territories.⁵

² Rony Brauman in Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London ; New York: Verso, 2011), 57.

³ For many scholars, the origins of territorial jurisdiction date back to the development of cartographic technologies, since “before the development of modern cartography, legal authority generally followed relationships of status rather than those of autochthony.” See Richard T. Ford, “Law’s Territory (A History of Jurisdiction),” in *The Legal Geographies Reader: Law, Power, and Space*, by Nicholas K. Blomley and David Delaney (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass., USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 201.

⁴ The emblem is not limited to the cross; think of the red crescent, red diamond, etc.

⁵ We should mention that humanitarian space is not only a tributary of the territoriality of law. Indeed, there is a distinction to be made between the ‘territoriality of law’ and ‘the personality of law’, the latter referring to a legal regime whereby laws are attached to the individual and not to a bounded terrain or place. This was the case in

2.1.2 *Shrinking Humanitarian Space*

In political science and international relations theory, the understanding of the term ‘humanitarian space’ is generally centered on the idea of an *operating environment* where “the dynamic and complex interplay of political, military and legal actors, interests, institutions and processes” unfold.⁶ For humanitarian actors, who traditionally perceive themselves (or aspire to be perceived) as neutral and impartial actors, this ‘humanitarian space’ is a tool for preserving and measuring their distance from state power.

Since the 1990s, *this* humanitarian space is thought to be shrinking: humanitarian scholars argue that the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian action is disintegrating on several fronts. Critics have lamented the securitization and privatization of humanitarian aid, deploring how humanitarian principles are being coopted for political purposes deeply incompatible with humanitarian values. A proliferation of international NGOs, and other civil society actors, making more openly partisan and ideological claims, have made the landscape of humanitarianism a multifarious, heterogeneous one.⁷ In addition, since the Iraq wars in particular, governments around the world have begun recasting their own political projects and military *interventions* as

Antiquity, when “Roman and Barbarian law existed side by side,” with law being then “tied to the citizenship or identity of the individual, not to the political system he or she lived under.” For a more in depth conversation about the personality of law, see Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 213.

⁶ Sarah Collinson et al., *Humanitarian Space: A Review of Trends and Issues*, 2012, 1–4.

⁷ Antonio Donini, “The Far Side: The Meta Functions of Humanitarianism in a Globalised World,” *Disasters* 34 (April 1, 2010): S220–37 ; Antonio Donini, “Humanitarian Principles in the Post 9/11 World,” 2012, <http://principlesinpractice.org/article/humanitarian-principles-in-the-post-9/11-world>.

humanitarian ones, muddying the definition of humanitarianism.⁸ Permeated by human rights and human security agendas, humanitarian organizations are said to be recasting their mandates and shifting their focus from impartial assistance to the imposition of western democratic norms and free-market economic development.

The idea that humanitarian space is shrinking is not entirely inaccurate, but it implies a belief in a mythical “golden age” of humanitarian action, in which humanitarianism would have been truly non-political, and humanitarian access would have been unfettered.⁹

Belief and rejection of this myth have segmented humanitarian scholarship in two camps: the hagiographies of humanitarian institutions and the praises of their heroic work on the one hand; the virulent critiques portraying aid as either desperately naïve or diabolically self-interested on the other. For the past twenty years, humanitarian scholarship has been somewhat stuck in this false dichotomy, between the pure and impure, or the Samaritans and the cynics.

2.2 The Camp Fetish

The spatial correlate of this false dichotomy is the humanitarian camp. Indeed, of the rare conversations about humanitarian spatiality (when understood in its tridimensional and physical sense), most, if not all, have focused on camps. Seen as the frame of reference of humanitarian

⁸ Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

⁹ Kristin Bergtora Sandvik et al., “Humanitarian Technology: A Critical Research Agenda,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 96, no. 893 (March 2014): 228.

physicality, the camp is treated not only as a temporary planning type, but also as an ahistorical concept. In other words, it is as if the camp is a spatial model so generic and ubiquitous that it does not require historicizing. In the world of practice, even the more recent humanitarian policies framed as ‘alternative to camps’ essentialize the camp as the perennial rule for humanitarian space-making.¹⁰ The all-encompassing, quasi-exclusive reliance on the camp as the frame of reference – whether in positivist or critical scholarship, and whether in theory or practice – justifies the name given to this section: the camp fetish.

2.2.1 *Spaces of Exception and the Critique of Modernity*

The first wave of critical humanitarian studies that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s within political science and international relations devoted significant attention to refugee camps. The theme features prominently in reviews of peacebuilding interventions and post-Cold War humanitarian action.¹¹ From a global politics perspective, camps were depicted as a technique of control designed to fulfill ‘securitizing’ objectives and contain crises close to their epicenters in order to avoid spillovers into the ‘West’.¹² From a slightly more local standpoint, camps were criticized for amplifying inequalities between refugees and local populations, as well as for fanning violence and social unrest. Sarah Lischer, for example, described how camp life allowed for the

¹⁰ See <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/alternatives-to-camps.html>

¹¹ Sarah Kenyon Lischer, *Dangerous Sanctuaries: Refugee Camps, Civil War, and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid*, 1 edition (Ithaca, N.Y.; Bristol: Cornell University Press, 2006); Gil Loescher, *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the Global Refugee Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Gil Loescher and James Milner, “Security Implications of Protracted Refugee Situations,” *The Adelphi Papers* 45, no. 375 (July 2005): 23–34.

¹² Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? : The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca ; London: Cornell University Press, 2002); Lischer, *Dangerous Sanctuaries*.

political organization of refugee communities, which in turn fueled their proclivity to engage in violence. In this scholarship, the figure of the camp epitomized the ambiguities and paradoxes of humanitarian aid, as both protecting and subjugating refugees and disaster victims, and as manifesting the failure (rather than the mere impossibility) of humanitarian neutrality.

This view still pervades much of the contemporary literature. Beyond political science, anthropological accounts have also employed the figure of the camp to denounce the corrosive sovereignty of humanitarian organizations over refugees and refugee settlements. The camp plays an illustrational, almost didactic role, in revealing the (abuse of) power of what many have termed the “humanitarian government.”¹³ The camp has become synonymous with the ensemble of political and governance mechanisms used by international relief organizations to manage the stateless (or, in Michel Agier’s terminology, the “undesirables”). This type of governance – characterized by some as a “government without citizens” and as the “low-cost management of exclusion on a planetary scale”¹⁴ – is usually depicted as engendering new forms of exclusion, deprivation or suffering. The worst part being that, because it is humanitarian, it also usually enjoys impunity.¹⁵ These studies, although often grounded in fieldwork and ethnography, either

¹³ See, amongst others, Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables : Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government* (Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2011). Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*. See also, Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley, Calif. ; London: University of California Press, 2011). Noting that for Fassin, the expression ‘humanitarian government’ encapsulates more than governance by international aid actors. In the Foucauldian tradition, Fassin speaks more broadly of a politics, in Western liberal democracies, which “mobilizes compassion rather than justice,” based on a problematization of the world through a logic/vocabulary of suffering and trauma, instead of the language of social critique.

¹⁴ Agier, *Managing the Undesirables*.

¹⁵ Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford [Oxfordshire] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

homogenize humanitarian institutions or homologize them with state institutions, obfuscating their widely distinct mechanics, and the differences among humanitarian organizations as well as differences between humanitarian governance and state governance¹⁶ – a question we shall return to later.

The critique of humanitarianism that gets articulated through the figure of the refugee camp is also linked to a much larger philosophical discussion about late-modern political membership, citizenship, biopolitics (power over the life and death of human bodies), and the points of failure of modern political systems. Indeed, the trope of the camp runs through social science and the humanities, side by side with the figure of the refugee. In the philosophical work of Hannah Arendt, as well as of Giorgio Agamben and Seyla Benhabib after her, the refugee exposes the limits of the late modern political state system and Westphalian notion of sovereignty, revealing the moment when “the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of Man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterize them as rights of the citizens of a state.”¹⁷ The camp is seen as the spatial counterpart to the political state of exception described in these works.

The larger point is that most of what has been written on humanitarian camp is not so much a discussion of the actual realities and challenges of humanitarian place-making, but a much larger

¹⁶ I realize that I am skirting the thorny question of the asylum seekers detention centers (e.g. Calais in France), which falls outside the purview of the international humanitarian organizations discussed in this dissertation. These detention centers are usually administered by the state directly, without the institutional humanitarian intermediary.

¹⁷ Giorgio Agamben, “We Refugees,” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 49, no. 2 (1995): 114–119.

critique of late capitalist society's ills, in which the camp is used as a metaphor to articulate an increasing production of placelessness (non-lieux),¹⁸ inhumane treatment of surplus populations, and state of perpetual emergency. Without denying these critiques their depth and traction, this dissertation seeks alternative lenses to explore humanitarian spatiality.

2.2.2 *From Camps to Cities*

The critique of the camp has evolved over the last decade, especially in response to the stark increase in the life-span of refugee camps, a phenomenon often referred to as the 'urbanization' of camps. Recently, the Syrian Refugee Camp of Zaatari in Jordan captured the global imaginary, (and much of the Western media's coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis) with a little under half a million Syrian refugees either living or transiting via this camp, making it at some point the fourth largest city in Jordan.¹⁹ As astounding as Zaatari is, it is only the most recent example of a trend that began with the Palestinian camps of the 1970s, and went on to include the (in)famous camp of Dadaab, housing Somali refugees in Kenya for the past three decades, the Sahrawi refugee camps of the Western Sahara, and the other sites of protracted displacement across the globe.

In light of the proliferation of protracted exiles, architectural and urban scholars have begun to puzzle over the 'city-like' character of these refugee settlements, framing the debate frequently, if not exclusively, around a 'camp/city' binary, with the recurrent question being: when does a

¹⁸ Marc Augé, *Non-lieux : introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Librairie du XXe siècle (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

¹⁹ "Life in Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan's Fourth Biggest City | Oxfam International," accessed June 17, 2019, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/crisis-syria/life-zaatari-refugee-camp-jordans-fourth-biggest-city>.

humanitarian camp become a city? Regrettably for the quantitatively minded, the distinction between a camp and a city fails demographic or morphological tests: in many cases, the population of camps ranks well above that of large cities. For many, the differences rather lie in matters of governance, political participation and refugee agency. There are two main positions. The first is that the camp and the city are constitutive of one another; the second is that camp and cities preclude one another's existence.

Manuel Herz and his team of architects from ETH Zurich take the first position. Their work traces the formation of a hybrid administration – a mix of United Nations governance and refugee management – within the network of Sahrawi camps, and documents the everyday life of refugees as having all the appearances of an urban everyday life.²⁰ Herz compares the international humanitarian control exercised over the space of the camps to the control over public spaces that is exercised by state institutions in cities of the Global North, suggesting that in essence, the sociopolitical dynamics unfolding in the 'urbanized' Sahrawi camps are no different than those animating urban life in say Zurich or New York City. After all, don't cities everywhere result from the constant tension between control (imposed from either the state or the market) and popular forces of emancipation?²¹ And aren't such tensions constitutive of urban life? The Sahrawi case

²⁰ For instance, they show how, over time, connectivity with the world outside the camps intensified through the construction of new roads and how economic life (re)appeared via the consolidation of networks between the camps and the neighboring towns.

²¹ This dynamic relationship is reminiscent of Polanyi's double movement

study thus concludes that “rather than being binary opposites, the city and the camp can be described as conditions that are always contained within, and necessitate, each other.”²²

Eyal Weizman presents a somewhat opposing view, stemming from his long-term interest in Palestinian refugee camps and in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories. He argues that humanitarian urbanity, so to speak, depends primarily on the existence of refugee politics – of refugees’ “claims, their rights and their potential action, their wishes, their exercise and their evasion of power, their potential return.”²³ The argument is that camps may become cities if and only if refugees reclaim political power and agency. It is with refugees constructing their own spaces, self-governing, posing demands and acting upon them, Weizman writes, that the potentiality of their political life will actualize. “There, where there were camps there could be cities.”²⁴

Weizman’s insistence on rights for collective organization aligns with fundamental tenets of critical urban theory, transposing to the humanitarian context debates about democratic planning in late capitalist societies. His is a direct reference to the concept of the right to the city, an idea first introduced by Henry Lefebvre in his work on the politics of space in the late 1960s and 1970s. Lefebvre’s concept emerged during the *trente glorieuses* in the wave of a movement to revise not only modernist architecture and functionalist urbanism, but also “such Marxist categories as class

²² Manuel Herz, Manuel Herz, and ETH-Studio Basel, *From Camp to City : Refugee Camps of the Western Sahara* (Baden: Lars Mueller ; Basel, 2013), 491.

²³ Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, 60–62.

²⁴ Weizman, 63.

struggle, alienation, division of labor, and commodity fetishism and the urgency to complement and transform them by a critique targeting new themes such as everyday life, consumption, and technocracy.”²⁵

Given critical urban scholarship’ state-centric orientation, it is unsurprising that such literature would equate humanitarian action with state action rather bluntly. What deserves more attention however, is the choice to apply a democratic normative framework over a justice-based normative framework for thinking about these new quasi-urban conditions.²⁶ Might it be simply because most of the available political philosophy of humanitarianism (see above on Agamben) does the same? In any case, it remains that, similar to the political-philosophical critiques that we reviewed above, urban theory applied to humanitarian space still paints humanitarian institutions with one brush, precluding more nuanced analyses of how humanitarian planning might differ from state planning.

2.2.3 Political Economies and Histories of Camps

While references to Harendt and Agamben’s continue to prevail in the scholarship on camps, a growing number of scholars in spatial and cultural studies are moving beyond, and even debunking the biopolitical and securitization narratives in favor of richer analyses of the political economy of

²⁵ Lukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory*, 2011, 4.

²⁶ Surprisingly, as far as we can tell from the present research, very little urban scholarship has examined camps in relation to other normative frameworks, such as the Just City.

camps, the materiality of camp dwellers' daily life, and the articulation of new forms of refugee agency.²⁷

A prime example of these new takes, is the work of Anoodarah Sidiqqi, who offers, in her layered history of the refugee camp of Dadaab, Kenya, a powerful rebuttal to the supposed evanescence or disembowelment of the political core lamented by the likes of Agier and Weizman:

“The history of Dadaab as a refugee site *does not occur entirely outside the bounds of legitimate architectural form and practice*; it has an exceptional history of architectural intervention, accompanied by profuse spatial imaging. It has functioned as a significant duty station for trained architects, with the physical planning and social function of the complex occasioning significant design and planning interventions. It has played an important part in the history of an international field of humanitarian architecture, iterating decades of expertise-building while providing a significant test bed for emergency practice to follow.”

Here, she suggests that the distinct politic (and produced subjectivity) of the camp-based refugee should be studied as a “constitutive element rather than a foil”. She also advocates for espousing a longer view, countering the heretofore ahistorical treatment of the camp.

On another front, Lewis Turner challenges biopolitical narratives by shining a critical political economy light onto the question of Syrian (non)encampment policies in Lebanon and Jordan, arguing that labor market concerns, more than securitization concerns, determine state policy towards refugees. In short, that the choice between security and segregation (camps) and

²⁷ See Romola Sanyal, “Urbanizing Refuge: Interrogating Spaces of Displacement,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 2 (March 1, 2014): 558–72. Or Lewis Turner, “Explaining the (Non-)Encampment of Syrian Refugees: Security, Class and the Labour Market in Lebanon and Jordan,” *Mediterranean Politics* 20, no. 3 (September 2, 2015): 386–404. See also Anooradha Siddiqi.

facilitation of labor market participation (non-encampment) are the results of economic policy rather than the suppression of dissent or expansion of humanitarian control. This view offers for a more granular understanding of both the refugees and the governance practices of refugee-hosting states. It opens fertile conversations about class differentiation among refugees (particularly camp vis-à-vis urban refugees), and the implications of using economic categories – i.e. seeing refugees as “economic resources to be harnessed” – as opposed to political ones.²⁸

2.3 The Materiality of Good Intentions

These historical and political-economical approaches to camp are a welcome change from the biopolitical narratives, yet they still limit the study of humanitarian spatiality to the camp frame of reference, and thus overlook the multitude of geographies shaped by aid actors, as well as the intricacies of humanitarian spatial practices.

One way out of the camp fetish is to turn to an emergent body of work in humanitarian studies which moves away from state-centric explanations, to focus on more internal considerations. This scholarship takes seriously the institutional and internal characteristics – such as the history, structure and organizational culture – of given humanitarian organizations. It is interested, less in deciding whether humanitarian organizations are a force of good or evil, and more in understanding how they navigate the very unique logistical and moral dilemmas that they face,

²⁸ Turner, “Explaining the (Non-)Encampment of Syrian Refugees.”

and how they translate norms and values into practical action. This branch of humanitarian studies asks the following sets of questions:

“How do these organizations translate values – or interests, for that matter – into practice? How do these values translate into what aid workers do every day, and what they do not do? (...) How does any particular organization decide which particular lives to save and which particular needs to service? How do they account for these decisions, to themselves and to others?”²⁹

To start, this internal approach dissects the complex relationship that humanitarian action entertains with states. While there is no doubt that international humanitarian organizations are influenced by their relationships with states and state apparatus, they are nonetheless autonomous from them: humanitarian organizations are themselves actors able to “bow to, or withstand ... pressures from states”.³⁰ The two organizations studied in this research, the ICRC and the UNCHR, have such varying degrees of autonomy: the ICRC is politically independent, but financially reliant on a small number of powerful states; while the UNHCR is more dependent – both politically and financially – on states. Neither, however, responds to direct orders from states.

Once it is established that international humanitarian organizations are autonomous political actors, it is possible to examine just what distinctive type of political actors they are, how they change, what distinct ethical predicaments they face, what expertise they possess, and, eventually, what kind of planning they do.

²⁹ Monika Krause, *The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason* (Chicago : London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 3.

³⁰ Miriam Bradley, *Protecting Civilians in War: The ICRC, UNHCR, and Their Limitations in Internal Armed Conflicts*, First edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 22-23.

2.3.1 Professional Field and Shared Social Space

Scholars have recently taken an interest in the structuration and formalization of humanitarian action(s) into a cohesive professional field, drawing heavily on Pierre Bourdieu's theories of fields of practice and social capital, and on Max Weber's spheres of differentiation.

Monika Krause and Aurora Fredriksen have described the practices of linkage that bind humanitarian organizations together, illuminating both the dynamics between humanitarianism and its neighboring fields (development, charity, philanthropy, state governance), and the shared practices and competition that occur within the field itself – i.e. “the assumptions that are common across agencies and the debates agencies have with each other about what it means to be humanitarian.”³¹ They stress “the practical logic of [the shared social space] as an important aspect of what is standing between those who give, on the one hand, and ‘the suffering of the world,’ on the other hand; this practical logic mediates efforts to help those in need.”³²

Krause unearths the various logics at play in humanitarian work. More specifically, she speaks of the humanitarian field as a market for projects, whereby relief is a form of production (and capture) of a primary output, the “project”:

³¹ See Monika Krause, *The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason* (Chicago : London: University of Chicago Press, 2014). And Aurora Fredriksen, “Making Humanitarian Spaces Global: Coordinating Crisis Response through the Cluster Approach” (Columbia University, 2012). Interestingly, both name this shared social space “humanitarian space.”

³² See Monika Krause, *The Good Project, 4.*

“The pursuit of the good project develops a logic of its own that shapes the allocation of resources and the kind of activities we see independently of external interests but also relatively independently of beneficiaries needs and preferences. (...)”

The project is a commodity, and thus those helped, the beneficiaries, become part of a commodity. The pursuit of the good project encourages agencies to focus on short-term results for selected beneficiaries. The market in projects also means that beneficiaries are put in a position where they are in competition with each other to become part of a project.”³³

More fundamentally, she argues that there is not a single, coherent humanitarian reason that animates the commitment to saving lives and protecting people regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender or political affiliation. Instead, there is a “fragmentation of reason”.³⁴

2.3.2 *Ethics and Norms*

This idea of a plurality of motives, or a fragmented reason, is echoed in other studies of global norms, which highlight the fact that norms take on different meanings at different times in different political contexts. Even norms that are “designed primarily to assist and protect individuals within the spheres of human rights, aid, humanitarianism, peacekeeping, intervention and displacement”³⁵ are malleable. There is tension between their adoption and their implementation, since “norms are processes, works in progress, which ‘tend to be vague, enabling their content to be filled in many ways and thereby to be appropriated for a variety of different purposes’.”³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See note 30.

³⁵ Alexander Betts and Phil Orchard, eds., *Implementation and World Politics: How International Norms Change Practice* (2014), 3.

³⁶ Betts & Orchard quoting Krook, M.L., and True, J. 2012. “Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms: The United Nations and the Global Promotion of Gender Equality.”

Take independence from state action for instance, a norm crucial to shaping the humanitarian ethos. While it most often presented as a tenet of *secular* humanitarianism, cultural historians remind us of its deep *religious* origins. In his history of the emergence of the Red Cross in late nineteenth century Geneva, Shai Dromi uncovers the links between the founders of the Red Cross and the theologians of the Réveil movement – an orthodox branch of Calvinism – who espoused a particularly suspicious view of the State, nurtured deep pessimism in the State’s ability to sustain long-lasting peace, and wished to maintain charity firmly outside the State’s purview.³⁷ We could contrast that definition of independence with the definition of independence that appeared during the cold war, at a time when some nascent humanitarian organizations were seeking non-alignment with either blocks (think Doctors without Borders, a resolutely secular organization).

On the topics of norms, political philosopher Jennifer Rubenstein makes the case for establishing a distinct humanitarian political ethics. Accepting that ethical predicaments are unavoidable, the question for Rubenstein becomes not whether what humanitarian actors do is good or bad, but whether it is better or worse. In short, the question is not “how can we avoid moral compromise?” but rather “which moral compromises should we reject, and which should we grudgingly accept?”³⁸ She maps out four important types of predicaments that humanitarian actors face. One, called “the quandary of the second best,” relates to the type of governance that humanitarians

³⁷ Shai M. Dromi, “Soldiers of the Cross: Calvinism, Humanitarianism, and the Genesis of Social Fields,” *Sociological Theory* 34, no. 3 (September 1, 2016), 205-206.

³⁸ Jennifer C. Rubenstein, *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs*, First edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4-5.

engage in, which is very different, and more limited, than that of actual states, and which she explains in the following terms:³⁹

“Even if humanitarian INGOs perform some functions better than other actors in the short term, they have less potential to perform these functions better in the medium and long term. (...) When it comes to conventional and global governance activities, INGOs are *often second-best actors* because of features that distinguish them from well-functioning democratic governments: they are not authorized by, or accountable to, the people most significantly affected by their actions; they cannot impose taxes; they do not have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; and they are poor ‘mirrors’ or descriptive representatives of people directly affected by their actions.”⁴⁰

For Rubenstein, it matters to reflect on which norms – whether democratic, egalitarian, humanitarian or justice-based norms – are most relevant, or come in conflict, in given predicament, for a given humanitarian activity.

While it is beyond the scope of this research to dive much deeper into Rubenstein fascinating and much needed map of humanitarian organizations political ethics, we can hold onto the idea that different activities – such as basic service provisions or the other expert-led activities which will be discussed in this dissertation – deserve more nuanced assessments than the ones proposed by the interpretations premised on the golden-age myth.

It is also important to remember that internal organizational norms (a commitment to organizational hierarchy, in the case of UNHCR, or a firm belief in discretion and the use of checks

³⁹ Rubenstein, *Between Samaritans and States*. The other three ethical predicaments are: the problem of spattered hands, the cost-effectiveness conundrum, and the moral motivation tradeoff.

⁴⁰ Rubenstein, *Between Samaritans and States*, 8–10.

and balance, in the case of the ICRC) influence how humanitarian organizations behave and change.⁴¹

2.3.3 *Auxiliary Space*

This budding scholarly interest in the institutional and internal features of humanitarian organizations helps to shed light on the governance mechanisms and professional cultures of aid organizations – themes crucial to our study of humanitarian spatial practices.

If spatial (or even scientific) expertise still remain largely absent from the conversation, one scholarly work comes close to illuminating the topic. Drawing on Lefebvre, Latour, but mostly on Bourdieu’s work on agency and structure, political scientist Lisa Smirl proposes a tripartite model for theorizing the spatial and material dimensions of international aid. She distinguishes between three levels or three types of humanitarian spaces: 1) the auxiliary space; 2) the space of the humanitarian imaginary; and 3) the space of tactics.⁴²

The first, the auxiliary space, is “the physical, material and spatial environments resulting from the everyday practices of the international community when performing an intervention.”⁴³ This space includes the compounds, gated communities, expatriate hotels and bars that are built or

⁴¹ For an important conversation about the different organizational cultures of ICRC and UNHCR, especially as they regard humanitarian protection, see [Bradley, *Protecting Civilians in War*](#).

⁴² Lisa Smirl, *Spaces of Aid: How Cars, Compounds and Hotels Shape Humanitarianism* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 2015).

⁴³ *Ibid*, 203-205.

transformed in the presence of the international humanitarian community. Think, for instance, of the transfiguration of entire neighborhoods in Kabul or Baghdad to accommodate ‘green zones’ (zones designed to ensure the security of various United Nations agencies or international development banks). A key characteristic of auxiliary humanitarian space, Smirl notes, is that it is delinked from the local environment – a disjuncture that she attributes to the (perceived) securitization of aid, that is, to the perception that aid workers and aid organizations are the target of violence and susceptible to be attacked and robbed.

The second level is the space of the humanitarian imaginary, or as she defines it, “the abstract, conceptual, yet programmatic way the international community thinks about the so-called problem of underdevelopment”:

“This humanitarian imaginary is based largely upon inputs from auxiliary space: on the feedback, evaluations and pictures that are reported back from the field. And because these inputs are developed primarily from within the auxiliary space, which is delinked from local environments, a dynamic is created whereby the ‘real’ circumstances are always kept at bay, always outside the process (...)

The space of the humanitarian imaginary ... relies on conceptual, reified models and templates. There is no room in this space for any feedback that destabilizes the fundamental principles of humanitarianism as they are understood within the imaginary. It pushes out these dissonances, privileging the spectacle of humanitarianism as represented within auxiliary space.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Finally, the third space, which Smirl calls the space of tactics, and which I would call the space of projects, is the “lived project space [where] the beneficiaries respond and adapt to what the aid workers build and provide.”⁴⁵

While I would argue that much of the work produced in design schools today (work that touches on the spatial dimension of aid) falls within this third space (the project space), this dissertation is most interested in the second space, the space of the imaginary. It is precisely these distorted feedback mechanisms and the resistance to integrate dissonances, which all occur in the space of imaginary, that motivate my own research.

“The same space of the compound and its associated auxiliary space (...) the rapacious demand from headquarters for field reports, best practices, lessons learnt and situation reports encourages spectacle of development as constructed from within the humanitarian enclave. *Here local issues are framed in global terms.*”⁴⁶

To make the point in a less abstract way, let us look at the example of humanitarian reconstruction projects built by international aid agencies in post-tsunami Aceh (Indonesia), which Smirl discusses. The humanitarian projects conveyed western residential imaginaries on two levels. On a first level, while the shelters might have sought to be “aesthetically” vernacular and respectful of local materials, they were inordinately focused on the single-family dwelling, a western typology that departs from the local socio-spatial arrangements where houses are clustered together, housing extended family members under one roof. On the second level, the mere fact that

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 206. Emphasis added.

reconstruction was predominantly geared at shelter provision (as opposed to other types of aid) was itself symptomatic of the aid workers' own positionality. Smirl explains:

“Within the humanitarian aid community, the idea of ‘home’ is an elusive concept. The ethnoscape of the humanitarian aid worker is the topography of nomads. The concept of home is held up as an archetype of stability and comfort. Arguably, within a globalizing concept in general, the idea of home or neighborhood has come to occupy almost a sacred status. Houses have the added benefit that they are seen to be relatively non-political.”⁴⁷

The reason why Smirl's work is so helpful to my project, is because it addresses the multidirectional, co-constitutive relationship between international aid and spatial, social, cultural processes. It sketches a feedback loop between spatial practice and the humanitarian ethos.

2.3.4 *Good Intentions*

Smirl, Krause, and the other authors cited here begin doing for humanitarianism what James Ferguson did for international development planning, that is, shedding light on the mechanics of humanitarianism, how it works in practice and what are its actual, real, socio-spatial effects – as opposed to asking how closely the idea of humanitarian might approximate a truth.⁴⁸ This angle of approach allows one “to demote intentionality – in both its “planning” and “conspiracy”

⁴⁷ Lisa Smirl, “Building the Other, Constructing Ourselves: Spatial Dimensions of International Humanitarian Response,” *International Political Sociology* 2, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 244–45.

⁴⁸ James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine. Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

incarnations – and to insist that the structured discourse of planning and its corresponding field of knowledge are important, but only as part of a larger ... set of interrelations.”⁴⁹

2.4 The Disastrous Effects of Historical Deferment

The material approach reviewed above remedies some of the gaps left by the two notions with which we began this literature review, namely 1) the notion that humanitarian space is primarily immaterial and 2) the notion that the camp is the end-all be-all of humanitarian spatiality.

On the one hand, it confirms what should have been obvious all along: humanitarianism is deeply material – it is manifest in built form, and has real effects on the creation of social arrangements. On the other, it suggests that humanitarian organizations’ institutional characteristics, including their relationships with states, the structure of their professional field, their distinctive organizational cultures, and their contingent interpretations of norms, are a valid point of entry for studying their practices, including, for our purpose, their spatial and planning practices. Circling back to the camp question, this suggests that rather than being the frame of reference, the camp ought to be situated as *one out of many* institutional approaches to intervening in the physical world.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 275. Ferguson writes that “when new structures are not produced in accordance with discursively elaborated plans, they are all the same produced, and the role of discursive and conceptual structures in that production is by no means in a small one.”

In addition to being situated institutionally, humanitarian spatial practices (including the camp) ought to also be situated historically. Indeed, I hypothesize that because the camp is the model, and because the model is thought to be a-historical, humanitarian spatiality as a whole has not been historicized.

This void is part of a wider tendency within the humanitarian profession and humanitarian scholarship to neglect history, which some have labelled “historical deferment.”⁵⁰ There has been a real push in the last ten years, not only to explain this deferment, but to remedy it. Histories of NGOs, of charitable markets, and of ‘compassionate consumption’ are now looking beyond the state, or beyond the hagiographic accounts of specific humanitarian organizations, to better understand humanitarianism(s) myriad chronologies, motives and geographies. They suggest to think about humanitarian history “less in terms of ruptures or breaks, and focus more on the moments of acceleration and continuities.”⁵¹ The new historiography pays more attention to the dialogues and transnational trajectories of humanitarian discourses and practices (including South-South and South-North trajectories), not only to offer deeper accounts of particular facets of humanitarian aid, but also, and more crucially, to understand how change itself is perceived and dealt with in humanitarian thought.⁵² The present research thus heeds the call of humanitarian

⁵⁰ See Craig Calhoun.

⁵¹ Kevin O’Sullivan, Matthew Hilton, and Juliano Fiori, “Humanitarianisms in Context,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 23, no. 1–2 (January 2, 2016): 1–15.

⁵² See amongst others, Eleanor Davey and Kim Scriven, “Humanitarian Aid in the Archives: Introduction,” *Disasters* 39 (October 2, 2015): s113–28; Eleanor Davey et al., *A History of the Humanitarian System: Western Origins and Foundations* (London: Overseas Development Institute Humanitarian Policy Group, 2013); and Bertrand Taihe and John Borton, “History, Memory and ‘Lessons Learnt’ for Humanitarian Practitioners,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 23, no. 1–2 (January 2, 2016): 210–24.

historians and makes a case for doing a historical study of the development on planning expertise within humanitarian institutions.

There is one final glaring absence in humanitarian scholarship that concerns us, and thus needs discussing: the omission of any discussion on the place of science, technical rationality, expertise and instrumentality – in the sense of the concrete instruments and technical objects that mediate between intents and effects – in the humanitarian ethos. The following chapter proposes to do just that. Integrating both institutional and historical perspectives in the study of humanitarian spatial instruments, it will question how humanitarian ideals relate to the realm of the technical, and how in turn, the technical ideals informs the transformation of humanitarian action.

Chapter 3 Instruments and Socio-technical imaginaries of Aid (Conceptual Framework)

The conceptual framework for this project starts from the premise that the inherited tools of urban theory¹ (for instance the camp-to-city divide) are inadequate to describe let alone explain humanitarian urbanism. The controversies that humanitarian urbanism poses – which always mixes moral, political and technical aspects² – elude explanations that are either technologically deterministic (i.e. claims that a particular design or physical layout would ensure dignity and bring about human flourishing) or politically deterministic (i.e. claims that the fulfillment of such and such political right would do the same). And yet, as the preceding review of the literature just showed, humanitarianism is primarily studied as a set of moral values, ethical principles, or political propositions. Conversations about humanitarian expertise – especially about expertise that relates to material, technical or infrastructural tasks, as it does in our case – are not entirely absent, but they generally decouple questions of materiality and technology from the political and the legal.³ In the grey and professional literatures, humanitarian technical expertise is often discussed in merely functional terms, as if technical practices were somewhat value-free.

¹ The same can be said about the conventional tools of political theory, for that matter.

² If it is true that planning and planning theory are by nature relational fields that overlap the economic, political, social and cultural spheres, humanitarian urbanism (or humanitarian planning) deals with an exacerbated version of this overlap.

³ Notable exceptions are: Redfield's work on the history of the use of humanitarian kits and Krause's work on humanitarian projects and 'logical frames', which have both been referred to in the previous chapter.

As a way out of the impasse, my project proposes to frame humanitarian urbanism in terms of a socio-technical system or imaginaries, in order to shed light on the crucial relation between expertise, spatial practices and the conduct of humanitarian activities, both within distinct humanitarian organizations and within the humanitarian field at large. Science technology and society studies (STS), together with related intellectual approaches – such as material semiotics, Actor Network Theory (ANT) or the Social Construction of Technological Systems (SCOT) – offer methods and concepts that are particularly well suited to this goal: at the heart of such approaches is the desire to straddle technological and sociopolitical analyses, taking seriously the “seamless web” of relations between material artefacts, meaning-making and power relations.

The following paragraphs set up the analytical framework for my project. I first define the sociotechnical imaginaries of humanitarian urbanism to be my object of analysis, and then, turn to my unit of analysis, the instruments of aid. The synthesis is illustrated in **Figure 3** - The Sociotechnical imaginaries of humanitarian urbanism, included at the end of this chapter.

3.1 Sociotechnical imaginaries as an analytical frame

3.1.1 Socio-technical systems

STS, and notably early work on the history and sociology of large socio-technical systems, “stresses the importance of paying attention to the different but interlocking elements [in a given system] of physical artifacts, institutions and their environment, and thereby offers an integration

of technical, social, economic and political aspects.”⁴ For the audience of this dissertation, it is useful to specify that the notion of ‘technology’ used in this intellectual sphere incorporates multiple layers of meaning, including, at least, 1) the level of physical objects or artifacts (in the humanitarian world, these could be drones that delivers food aid, or software that permit the computer aided design of a refugee site, or even simply tarpaulin or an emergency engineering handbook); 2) the level of activities or processes (such as conducting a land survey, building a dry latrine, or negotiating access to political prisoners); and 3) the level of knowledge and skills available to a group or a collective (in the case of humanitarian organizations, that could be knowledge of IHL treaties, or an understanding of emergency sanitation systems).⁵

At a basic level, framing humanitarian urbanism as a “technological system” is a way of distilling the scientific and technological essence of aid. As I have mentioned, it is crucial to do this, as it has rarely been done. The move helps to define a type (or types) of humanitarian expertise and infrastructure that are properly and specifically humanitarian. This is an important first step. On the one hand, it rebalances scholarship that insists too much on political and moral motives to explain humanitarian behavior. On the other, it goes beyond the view that humanitarians merely borrow expertise and instruments from the military and medical (and to some degree the religious) fields. From a more techno-centric perspective, one can start to appreciate, for instance, recent

⁴ Wiebe E. Bijker et al., *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, Anniversary (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012). xlii

⁵ Wiebe E. Bijker et al., *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*. xli-xlii

historical work, such as Bertrand Taithe's study of 19th century charitable markets,⁶ which enriches the humanitarian origin story by showing that humanitarian actors are quite apt at rapid innovation, integrating at rapid pace technologies from a much wider range of fields, including, in the late 19th century, management and marketing fields, and performing serious hybridization work to transform borrowed tools into their own. The technical systems perspective can also help us understand why humanitarian research and training centers directed by emergency physicians or by legal specialists of IHL might produce very different types of humanitarian epistemologies (and experts).

A point of nuance is in order, however. While STS allows us to unearth the technical dimension of aid, it seems useful to remind the reader that the field of STS emerged in part from projects in history and sociology of science and technology that were interested (at least in the very beginning) in the social aspects of things considered somewhat outside the social: laboratories, scientific or engineering endeavors, etc. In the case of humanitarian urbanism, the dynamic is somewhat flipped on its head. Here, we are interested in unearthing the technological and material dimensions of something that is considered outside the technological or the scientific. To put it perhaps a little too bluntly, while renowned STS colleagues have been busy finding traces of the social in engineering drawings or scientific inscriptions, this research is interested in uncovering traces of scientific authority in moral and legal inscriptions.

⁶ Sarah Roddy, Julie-Marie Strange, and Bertrand Taithe, *Charity Market And Humanitarianism In Britain, 1870-1914*. (S.L.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

3.1.2 Coproduction

Once the technical and scientific dimensions of humanitarian action are established, we can turn to the question of how these dimensions ought to be linked with the social and political behaviors of humanitarian organizations. One way to establish these relationships is to think in terms of “coproduction,” an idiom developed by Sheila Jasanoff to underscore the two-way dynamic that exists between the co-constitution of the social order and the natural order.⁷ “Knowledge and its material embodiments, Jasanoff writes, are at once products of social work and constitution of forms of social life (...) Scientific knowledge, in particular, is not a transcendent mirror of reality. It both embeds and is embedded in *social practices, identities, norms, conventions, discourses, instruments, and institutions* – in short, in all the building blocks of what we term the social.”⁸ To restate this in our context, and insisting on the normative and the instrumental aspects of the argument, we could say that humanitarian urbanism shapes humanitarian norms and instruments as much as humanitarian norms and instruments shapes humanitarian urbanism. Ultimately the idiom of coproduction is interested in the problem of power and rulership, and seeks to explain the coproduction of the governed and the rulers, according sustained importance to the establishment of expertise and authority.

⁷ Sheila Jasanoff, “Ordering Knowledge, Ordering Society,” in *States of Knowledge : The Co-Production of Science and Social Order*, International Library of Sociology (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), 13–45.

⁸ Sheila Jasanoff, “Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity,” in *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3. Emphasis added.

3.1.3 Sociotechnical imaginaries

For all its analytical value, however, co-production remains a broad theoretical umbrella that does not directly lend itself to more focused analyses. Therefore, we employ an adjacent notion, the concept of socio-technical imaginary, which provides fruitful ways to examine our problem.

As defined by Jasanoff and Kim, socio-technical imaginaries are “collectively held institutionally stabilized and publicly performed visions of desirable futures animated by shared understanding of forms of social life and order attainable through and supportive of technological advances.”⁹ Closer to our world, Antoine Picon develops the notion further to offer analytical traction in the context of the study of infrastructure and urban transformation. He defines sociotechnical imaginaries “as image-based systems of representation and values that are shared by various stakeholders.”¹⁰ What is perhaps most useful to us, is how Picon relates the notion to the built environment and to infrastructure projects. Picon locates the notion of imaginaries at the heart of a tripartite model of infrastructure, as a hinge between the material basis of infrastructure (e.g. roads, servers, cables) and the stabilized sociotechnical practices of groups of experts concerned with infrastructural projects. In short, the imaginary is where the materiality of infrastructure and the social regulation of infrastructure meet.¹¹ An example of sociotechnical imaginary (or ‘imaginary-practical entity’) for Picon, is the networked city as embodied by 19th century Paris: the networked city is not only an infrastructural feat, made possible by the technological advances

⁹ See *ibid.*, 4. for a longer explanation of theoretical precursors and nuances.

¹⁰ Antoine Picon, “Urban Infrastructure, Imagination and Politics: From the Networked Metropolis to the Smart City,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no. 2 (2018): 263. Emphasis added.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 267.

of the time, it also embeds suggestive organic representations of circulation and flows, and normative ideals about the integration of socio-economic differences into a peaceful urban organism – an integration that is generous, progressivist and moral, yet non-desiring of abolishing class differences. The socio-technical imaginary reveals how both social and the infrastructural projects are enmeshed. See Figure 1 for a diagrammatic expression of this framework, and how it is transposed to the study of humanitarian urbanism.

In both Picon and Jasanoff & Kim’s definitions, the collectives or stakeholders that share a given socio-technical imaginary can be nations, corporations, social movements, but also professions, users, etc. What is more, the lens allows us to account for multiple (sometimes conflicting) forms of rationality. Both definitions also contain a visionary element, which seems particularly well suited to our study of planning practices, which are projective in essence.



Figure 1 - Diagram of Analytical Framework

Moral imaginaries

On some level of social analysis, humanitarianism itself could be considered to be a socio-technical imaginary, stemming from high moralist ideals about human suffering and universalizing views of mankind (“tutti fratelli,” as the protagonists of Henri Dunant’s memoir would have it¹²) and enabled by powerful development of connectivity and communication technologies in the 19th and 20th centuries. We can find examples of the humanitarian imaginary being invoked by other actors in order to gain public and political support. A recent example of how “images and ideals can color and modify the strategies that [collectives] use to serve their interests, and sometimes considerably so,” as Picon writes, is when military groups resort to humanitarian assistance activities (distribution of food, reconstruction projects, etc.) to “win hearts and minds” as part of their combative strategy, as was the case with the NATO forces in Afghanistan, or with the US forces in Iraq.

Here, however, the goal is to hone in on the more particular ideals and visions that drive the humanitarian enterprise. Some of the moral ideals that immediately come to mind are the ones that humanitarian actors formally ascribe to themselves. The Fundamental Red Cross Principles, which have been adopted, at least in part, by many if not most international humanitarian organizations, captures the ethos well: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. The collective embrace of these ideals participated, over the time, to form a movement of red cross societies across the globe, and eventually enabled the coalescence of an entire (more pluralistic) international humanitarian field. Conversely, the rejection (or

¹² Henry Dunant, *Un souvenir de Solferino*. (Berne: Croix-Rouge suisse, 1962).

reinterpretation) of some of these ideals, also restructured the field. (The common humanitarian folk tale about the creation of MSF (Doctors without Borders) by ‘insurgent’ Red Cross doctors rejecting the neutrality ethos of the ICRC comes to mind). It should also be noted that these humanitarian “norms” are themselves underpinned by other cultural ideals, ranging from the Swiss Calvinists’ distrust in the modern nation-state system’s capacity to achieve lasting peace¹³, or the romanticization of the battlefield in 19th century Western Europe¹⁴, which scholars of historical sociology are bringing to the fore to shed new light on the construction of the humanitarian field.

Technical imaginaries

What this dissertation seeks to draw out are the subliminal technical ideals that are linked to these moral ideals and that play an important role in the constitution of humanitarian urbanism. By shedding a technical imaginary lens on humanitarian practices, and by being attentive to the languages used in technical humanitarian documents, one begins to see how discourses of both science and law are invoked in an attempt to counterbalance the subjectivity of “empathy” and morals, with the authority of objectivity and logic. We find that the ideal of efficiency (and its humanitarian derivatives, the ideals of mobility, transportability, and immediacy), the collectively held belief in the objectivity of science, and the authority of the language of law, permeate humanitarian action through and through.

¹³ Shai M. Dromi, “Soldiers of the Cross: Calvinism, Humanitarianism, and the Genesis of Social Fields,” *Sociological Theory* 34, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 207–8.

¹⁴ Geoffrey F.A. Best, *Humanity in Warfare*, 1980. Quoted in Dromi (2016).

Ideal of efficiency

The ideal of efficiency, which Picon defines as “a tension that arises between existing conception and fabrication techniques and a foreseen optimum,” comparing the quest for efficiency to the desire for truth,¹⁵ lurks in every corner of humanitarians’ technical ethos. It drives the kit-culture which will be described in more details in Chapter 4.4.

Assumption of objectivity

The performance of objectivity also comes into play in the assertion of humanitarian technical expertise. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have explained that: “objectivity aspires to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without inference, interpretation or intelligence.”¹⁶ In the context of our study, subminimal invocations of objectivity enhance the credibility of humanitarian experts, as they (allegedly) remove biases and prejudices. Since “objectivity is the suppression of some aspect of the self, the countering of subjectivity,”¹⁷ resorting to discourses of scientific objectivity veers the discussion away from subjective impulses of compassion for the suffering of fellow human beings – which have over time become hazy notions – towards more tractable, concerns of efficiency and cause-to-effect reasoning. Further, objectivity is often (mistakenly) conflated with truth, as Theodore Porter reminds us.¹⁸ We can

¹⁵ Antoine Picon, “Imaginaires de l’efficacité, pensée technique et rationalisation,” *Réseaux* 109, no. 5 (2001): 22.

¹⁶ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York : Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by the MIT Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Daston & Galison, 36.

¹⁸ Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

see how ‘objectivity as impersonality’ and ‘objectivity as truth’ might dovetail with ‘objectivity as neutrality. This suggests that humanitarians might be able to confront critiques about their lack of neutrality simply through enhanced objectivity.

This is what occurs, for instance, in the so-called “evidence-based” approaches to humanitarian assistance’, which invoke the objectivity of science to legitimize aid. While the approach itself is ubiquitous in the aid world, the United Kingdom Department of International Development (DFID) 2014 publication “*Promoting Innovation and Evidence-based approaches to building resilience and responding to humanitarian crises*” provides a good summary of the issues at hand. In that document, the authors frame DFID’s goal to be that of “*ending the need for aid*” (a surprising variant to the more common humanitarian goal of ‘ending human suffering’) through innovative humanitarian data-making. The rhetoric is the following:

the “use of high-quality data and evidence to inform decision-making at all levels (...) will help ensure that resources are targeted more precisely and allow us to track the outcomes and impacts of our work, deepening accountability to disaster-prone communities and to British tax-payers.”¹⁹

To be sure, the promotion of cost-benefit analysis – as a supposedly *improved* approach to humanitarianism – indicates a wish to comply with the technocratic standards of state or intergovernmental institutions, and finds its roots in a desire to “rationalize” aid expenses (the issue here is more about savings than it is about saving lives). More importantly, however, we see

¹⁹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-innovation-and-evidence-based-approaches-to-building-resilience-and-responding-to-humanitarian-crises>.

that objective, quantifiable evidence is promoted over other types of evidence (suffering, trauma, etc.). Incidentally, the technical involvement of data making promises to achieve an often-irreconcilable task: that of being simultaneous accountable to both distant disaster-struck populations and a closer citizenry.

Ideals of logic and law

In addition to scientific discourses, humanitarians also resort to legal discourses as means of stabilization. Indeed, humanitarian response and disaster response are often closely entangled with discourses of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL), discourses which have, in the eyes of the general public at least, come to signify a single idea instead of distinct practices competing with one another. By incorporating human rights and IHL discourses into their arguments, humanitarians mobilize law as a way to counterbalance the subjectivity of empathy or morals with the authority of logic. But, as John Dewey reminded us, discourses of law and logic involve their own set of tacit and implicit practices, their own crafts; they are not truth but a means to an end.²⁰ There is a certain “authority” derived from framing humanitarian problems as legal issues, since a legal decision “must assume as nearly as possible an impersonal, objective, rational form, ... rigorous in appearance and which give an illusion of certitude.”²¹ Critical legal scholars, such as David Kennedy, advocate for more scrutiny of humanitarians’ uses of the language of law,

²⁰ John Dewey, “‘Logical Method and Law’: 10 Cornell Law Quarterly 17 (1924)” (Princeton University Press, 05), 19.

²¹ *Ibid*, 24.

inciting “focusing on the structure [of articulations made in law’s name], and their translation into social practice and discussion, rather than their hegemony or veracity.”²²

I argue that the historically contingent combination of these moral and technical ideals, as they relate to interventions on the built environment, constitute the socio-technical imaginaries of humanitarian urbanism.

3.2 Instruments

To bring the description of my analytical framework to a close, I now turn to a final, critical component, its unit of analysis. In this research, the instruments of aid constitute the unit of analysis through which I track and identify the various socio-technical imaginaries have played out in the context of humanitarian spatial practice over time.

I subscribe to a rather broad definition of ‘instrument’ and considers a wide range of humanitarian instruments, from technical tools (e.g. a software), to documents and guidelines, to norms (e.g. a standard operating procedure), projects and policies (used by humanitarian professionals to engage with urban systems, spaces, and infrastructures. See **Figure 2** for a sample list of the manuals, guidelines and policies related to settlement planning compiled from the UNOG library over the course of this research.

²² David Kennedy, “Lawfare and Warfare” (Cambridge University Press, 26).

3.2.1 *Between politics and policy*

Using instruments as an analytical lens is common not only in STS, but in organizational theory or material studies writ large. These approaches evaluate the selection of instruments, their use, effects, and material characteristics as valid ways of knowing. Instruments unlock the “syntax of cultural practices” in ways that other forms of inquiry cannot; they manifest “modes of meaning in the world, dispositions of thought and comportment.”²³ Examining instruments has the potential to reveal values, interpretations of the social world, and specific conception of order and rule, *that are otherwise excluded from view*. The goal is not to evaluate instruments in utilitarian terms; what is most important is to examine how instruments embody the values and vision of the group that deploys them, and how they stabilize cultural or professional practices and patterns.

²³ Yukio Lippit.

A United Nations Plan for Refugees. Geneva: UNHCR, 1955.

UNHCR Settlement Planning and Development, Some Considerations: An Addendum to the UNHCR Sponsored Viability Survey of Ulyankulu and Katumba. Geneva: UNHCR, 1977.

UNHCR Experience with Rural Settlement Planning for Refugees in Africa. Diegues, A.C. Geneva: UNHCR, 1979.

Planning Rural Settlements for Refugees: Some Considerations and Ideas. Geneva: UNHCR, 1979.

UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies. Geneva: The Commissioner, 1982.

Refugees in Need. Geneva: UNHCR, 1983.

UNHCR Handbook for Social Services. Geneva: UNHCR, 1984.

UNHCR Handbook on Procedures for Dealing with Refugee Matters by UNDP Offices in Countries Where There Is No UNHCR Representative. Geneva: UNHCR, 1984.

UNHCR Guide to In-Kind Contributions in Refugee Emergencies. Geneva: UNHCR, 1986.

Development of environmental health criteria for locating and assessing disaster relief and refugee camps, using a multi-attribute utility rating technique. Shook, G. New Orleans (LA), 1990.

Some Environmental Considerations in Refugee Camps and Settlements. Geneva: UNHCR, 1991.

Defining Appropriate Environmental Systems for UNHCR. Ottawa; Geneva: UNHCR, 1992.

People Oriented Planning: Trainer's Manual. Geneva: UNHCR, 1995.

Refugee Camps: A Primer for Rapid Site Planning. Land, Shelter, Infrastructure Services. Geneva: UNHCR, 9999.

UNHCR Environment: Development of a GIS System in UNHCR for Environmental, Emergency, Logistic and Planning Purposes. Bouchardy, J.-Y. Geneva: UNHCR, 1995.

Towards Sustainable Environmental Management Practices in Refugee-Affected Areas: Country Reports : Kenya and Nepal. Geneva: UNHCR, 1998.

Resettlement Handbook. 2nd ed. Geneva: UNHCR, 2004.

Camp Coordination and Camp Management: Provisional Guidance for UNHCR Staff at Headquarters and in the Field for IDP Situations. Geneva: UNHCR, 2006.

Operational Protection in Camps and Settlements: A Reference Guide of Good Practices in the Protection of Refugees and Other Persons of Concern. Geneva: UNHCR, 2006.

Refugee Camps in Chad: Planning Strategies and the Architect's Involvement in the Humanitarian Dilemma. New Issues in Refugee Research Research Paper No. 147. Geneva: UNHCR, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, 2007.

UNHCR policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas. Geneva: UNHCR, 2009.

The Implementation of UNHCR's Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas. Global Survey – 2012. UNHCR, 2012.

UNHCR Policy on Alternatives to Camps. UNHCR. Geneva: UNHCR, 2014.

UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies. 4th edition. Geneva: UNHCR, 2015.

Figure 2 - Sample of UNHCR Manuals, Guidelines and Policies Related to Settlement Planning (compiled by the author)

Building on Foucault's work on governmentality, Patrick le Galès and Pierre Lascoumes have studied the instruments of public action as bridges between politics and policy.²⁴ They define the public action instrument as “an apparatus that is both technical and social, and that organizes specific social relations between state power and its recipients, according to the values and meanings embedded in it.”²⁵ For the authors, examining a specific instrument allows to hold into view both its history and characteristics, the generic aim for which it was intended, but also the unintended ways in which it is operationalized.

While humanitarian instruments are not the same as instruments of public action, Le Galès and Lascoumes' work is useful because it hones in on instruments that must comply with rather strict legal and ethical principles and protocols. More than technical devices, such instruments are bearers of a concrete notion of political and social relation, and supported by a specific understanding of regulation.

To illustrate the idea that instruments stabilize professional practices and patterns, we can look at the example of the language and the format of promotional instruments published by aid organizations on the topic of humanitarian housing (although it is rarely labelled as such), which reveals starkly different framings of the spatial planning question over time. For instance, UNHCR's reports and publications for the 2016 “Nobody Left Outside” Campaign (a UNHCR

²⁴ Pierre Lascoumes and Patrick Le Galès, *Gouverner par les instruments*, Gouvernances (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 2004).

²⁵ “Un instrument d'action publique constitue un dispositif à la fois technique et social qui organise des rapports sociaux spécifiques entre la puissance publique et ses destinataires en fonction des représentations et des significations dont il est porteur.” Ibid.

campaign to promote the ‘Global Shelter Coalition’ and mobilize donations from the private sector towards ‘shelter activities’) pose the problem of humanitarian spatial expertise in terms of ‘shelter’, which is portrayed simultaneously as “a basic human right” and as a technology of survival that centers on family-sized dwellings. The authors of the brochure describe the various “shelter solutions” supported by the UNHCR to help refugees “start a new life.” Among the achievements highlighted are the release of a shelter design catalogue, the launch of a new self-standing family tent, and various collaborations with the private sector on shelter innovation (including the design of a refugee housing unit developed in concert with the IKEA foundation, and the use of solar energy in a Syrian camp in Jordan).²⁶ These specific material solutions are directly linked to refugees’ survival, and presented as ensuring “protection, safety, privacy, comfort and health.”²⁷ As described in these fundraising instruments, technical shelter solutions seem to contain the problems created by the numerous (yet distinct) crises, whose consequences are forced displacement, but whose root causes are left unacknowledged. Forty years earlier, in a similar type of promotional instrument, the UNHCR had framed the question in very different language. Then, the question of housing was posed in terms of refugee integration at a much more fundamental level. “Solving refugee problems is very closely related to solving the socio-economic problems that afflict human settlements in general,” a 1976 UNHCR brochure stated, “on the one hand, refugees are generated by the very same tensions – overpopulation, poverty vs. affluence, oppression of minorities – which are among the root causes of the broader deterioration of

²⁶ UNHCR, “12 Month of Impact - Global Shelter Coalition” (UNHCR, undated (circa 2017), <https://www.unhcr.org/getinvolved/fundraising/5c11287c4/12-month-impact-global-shelter-coalition.html>).

²⁷ UNHCR “Nobody Left Outside : A Share Commitment to Refugees” – promotional brochure, undated. 103 pages.

mankind's aspirations. On the other hand, when a solution is found to the problems of refugees, whether they be individuals or large groups, it may also be a small contribution to solving the universal problem of how human beings can co-habit peacefully on this planet." Oriented towards "fitting pieces into a [global] puzzle," that 1976 promotional brochure was intent on connecting forced displacement to much broader (universal?) systems. The planning solutions presented then were thus socio-economic rather than legal and/or merely technological (the brochure is organized along chapters such as "home," planning versus preparedness," "planning permanent solutions," etc.).²⁸ This comparison reveals what humanitarian organizations deem to be legitimate spatial practices (and spatial problems). Because these two examples are public facing instruments designed to garner external attention and hopefully funding, they also reveal how humanitarian organizations present themselves to the outside world.

3.2.2 The Materiality and agency of instruments

The example of promotional humanitarian instruments cited above is emblematic of the variety of instruments examined in this research. An expected approach of spatial studies researchers looking for traces of the dissemination of spatial practices would have been to look for plans and drawings. After all, what better evidence of the planners' original intents than a plan or drawing showing the layout or workings of a site (or a building)? When it comes to humanitarian planning, however, my research revealed that the plan is not where the planning happens. Instead, the socio-technical

²⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Refugees in Human Settlements* (Geneva: Geneva: UNHCR, 1976). See table of contents and p. 4.

imaginaries are disseminated through instruments that are lighter and more mobile: documents, particularly hybrid documents such as field manuals, engineering handbooks, and, a favorite in the humanitarian world, in compilations of “good or best practices.” I call these documents hybrids, because they include both normative texts (most of them contain sections that recall organizational mandates and norms), but they also often contain schematic drawings, and often simplified engineering diagrams, which distinguishes them from mere policy documents.

I analyzed instruments for their potential both to record and to determine an organization's behavior with regards to settlement planning and urbanization more generally. Echoing Georgia Cole, I considered these hybrids instruments “not simply read as containers of discursive material but also as agents with potentially important and influential genealogy and effects.”²⁹ The Sphere Standards, a repository of minimum humanitarian standards first established in 1997, encapsulates the multiple dimensions and functions of humanitarian instruments: “Sphere is three things: a handbook, a broad process of collaboration and an expression of commitment to quality and accountability.”³⁰

Cole and Le Galès and Lascoumes’ position towards instruments echo larger (older) critiques of late modern bureaucracy, and particularly of the role of textual *documents* in international development. For instance, in his seminal critique of development, Arturo Escobar devotes a long passage to the role of textual documents in international development actors’ production of the

²⁹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Refugees in Human Settlements* (Geneva: Geneva: UNHCR, 1976).

³⁰ The Sphere Standards, 2004 Edition, Geneva, 5.

third world. An important point is that the text is detached from the social relations it helps to organize. Quoting sociologist Dorothy Smith, he explains that "bureaucracy is that mode of governing that separates the performance of ruling from particular individuals, and makes organizations independent of particular persons and local settings." While Escobar's main point is that the identities of the recipients of aid are socially constructed prior to the development expert's interaction with them, there is also a suggestion that the use of textual instruments separates the acts of governing from the individuals performing these acts – they erase the subjectivity of the expert (the one doing the governing). My own examination of humanitarian instruments revealed that this insulating potential of documents is heightened in the humanitarian context. There is a sense that technical standards and handbooks, in particular, free aid workers from having to exercise their own individual judgement – i.e. having to interpret what is moral or appropriate to do – by providing them with 'objective' roadmaps and guidelines.³¹

My research also confirmed what has been advanced by others scholars with regards to the production of intergovernmental or multilateral treaties: that production of documents is not only a means to an end, but very often, can be the end in itself. Legal ethnographer Annelise Riles explains how documents – particularly United Nations documents – are often destined to become artefacts to be shown and displayed. She has compared the production of UN documents to the weaving of mats, stating that "the form of these documents made manifest a reality of levels and

³¹ The argument conflicts with the following finding, which is too fascinating to be left out of this dissertation. At the ICRC, there are very few manuals as such. Until the 1990s, quite the opposite was true. Delegates were chosen very carefully for their supposed ability to exercise their own judgment, without having to refer to any rules beyond the fundamental principles. That being said, a review of HR documents reveals that this view led the ICRC to restrict its pool of delegates to Swiss Men only. Rather explicitly, women (for their alleged lack of emotional dissociation) and non-Swiss nationals (for their lack of political dissociation) were considered less capable of exercising "neutral" judgment.

levels of realities through a simultaneous and mutual apprehension of the document as pattern and the document as an independent object or unit.”³²

It is easy to see why handbooks and best-practice manuals, given their capacity to act at a (geographical and temporal) distance, would be preferred over other types of instruments. But is their lightness the only reason why they would be elevated over other types of instruments? Is there something to be said about the fact that humanitarianism can only be true and pure in textual documents? Humanitarian documents, and especially technical documents, are black boxes that suppress the competing narratives that supported their genesis. They enshrine particular interpretations of events, suppress the messier set of rationales, and obfuscate the competing narratives involved in their genesis. The handbooks, favored over and above drawings or other types of locally specific representations of space and place, perpetuate the myth of universality that is so fundamental to humanitarian work.

3.3 Synthetic analytical grid

The analytical grid in **Figure 3** summarizes my analytical framework and organizes the key findings that form the basis for the arguments that I develop in greater depth in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. It shows how one might understand humanitarian urbanism through the co-production and socio-technical imaginary lenses, answering the following broad question: How does

³² Annelise Riles, “Infinity within the Brackets,” *American Ethnologist*, 1998, 378–398.

humanitarian urbanism – as a system, as a set of practices, as an expertise – develop over time, and how does it relate to the transformation of humanitarian action as a whole? Empirically speaking, this grid is the synthesis of my collection and subsequent examination of instruments described above.

My analysis identified four socio-technical imaginaries of humanitarian urbanism, starting from the 1960s to the present (represented on the horizontal axis): first, a Material Turn, at the onset of the decolonization; second, the Habitat imaginary, in the 1970s, through to the mid-1980s; third, the Apogee of Standards, arising in the wake of the Cold War, and informing humanitarian aid through the 2000s; and finally, what I term, not without a hint of alliterative irony, the Smart Salvation imaginary. That latter imaginary is discussed at length in Chapter 5, while the former three are the object of Chapter 4.

To be clear, the choice to historicize these imaginaries is not to argue for a devolutionary view, in which moral authority would be progressively eclipsed by scientific or technological authority – although the subordination and tensions between these two authorities are certainly dynamic. Such an approach would have aligned with our own human contradictory relationship to technology, which oscillates between a profound dependency on technology and the relentless ambition to dominate it.³³ Instead, I am interested in the tug-and-pull between technological authority and other types of authority in the humanitarian hierarchies of action and production of codes and instruments over time, and in the constitution of humanitarian legitimacy. The point about

³³ Antoine Picon, *Smart cities : théorie et critique d'un idéal auto-réalisateur*, Collection Actualités ; 22 (Paris: ÉdB2, 2013).

legitimacy is crucial. In contrast to other planners, humanitarian planners perpetually deal with a dual crisis of legitimization. On the one hand, humanitarians intervene at times of crisis, in contexts where severe political strife and infrastructural failures have eroded state legitimacy (read here, the legitimacy of governments whose role it sometimes is to sanction the very presence of humanitarian actors on their territory). On the other hand, humanitarian legitimacy itself is deeply contested (as is the legitimacy of global governance regimes at present). Identifying sources of legitimation within aid, including the ways in which institutional and technological prerogatives overlap, is therefore important.

These four socio-technical imaginaries are described and analyzed according to five broad rubrics (on the vertical axis) – practices, identities, institutions, discourses, and representations:³⁴

PRACTICES: This rubric is the most central to my research. Here, I locate humanitarian planning in a series of dominant practices – what do humanitarian planners actually do? These practices are discussed in depth in chapters 4 and 5.

INSTITUTIONS: This rubric encapsulates the macro global institutional arrangements most salient in a given period.

REPRESENTATIONS: Here, I list what I found to be the dominant representations of urban ‘problems’ and representation of technology in the humanitarian ethos (How is urbanization understood within humanitarian circles? What is the accepted wisdom about technology? What images are invoked to discuss these two questions? etc.)

DISCOURSES: This rubric lists the discourses that are most closely associated with planning activities, and how specific ‘planning concerns’ are elevated at a given moment. I juxtapose the changing discourses around planning to the changing discourses of humanitarian neutrality.

IDENTITY: The identity rubric is split into two sub-rubrics, looking at the coproduction of humanitarian urbanism vis a vis the production of the humanitarian *expert* and of the humanitarian *object* (the refugee, the ‘beneficiary’, the ‘victim’) – the latter understood as the “object of planning” (for whom does the humanitarian planner plan?) Given the absence of a “spatial planning” category in the humanitarian repertoire, as was discussed at length in the methodology section, the humanitarian expert rubric needs

³⁴ The vertical structure of the grid rests on a loose adaptation of Jasanoff ordering patterns of coproduction, see Jasanoff, “Ordering Knowledge, Ordering Society” (2004).

to be understood as being fluid, including the “humanitarian planner,” but also other types of humanitarian technicians. Indeed, humanitarian spatial strategies can be devised by legal experts, epidemiologists, doctors, politicians, agronomists, logisticians just as much as by engineers or architects.

[Sociotechnical imaginaries of humanitarian urbanism]		The Material Turn	Habitat	The Apogee of Standards	Smart Salvation
Historical markers	<p>Immediate WW2 aftermath Marshall Plan 1950-60s</p> <p>Late 19th</p>	<p>Decolonization & expansion of international development 1960s</p>	<p>Geo-Economic Crises (limits of growth) 1970-80s</p>	<p>Globalization & Austerity 1980-90</p>	<p>Digital age & "Urban age" 2000s</p>
Practices	<p>Urban Dispersion Creation of Neutral Zones (within cities) and Neutral infrastructure (via the protective emblem)</p>	<p>Material aid (in kind and through provision of technical assistance) Rural development</p>	<p>Idiom of Human habitat and settlements 'Refugee Aid and Development' (RADs)</p>	<p>Kits, shelters and camp Intense coordination (Sphere Standards, Inter-Agency Standing Committee Cluster system)</p>	<p>Crisis-mapping E-transfers Urban infrastructure Digital database</p>
Institutions	<p>Humanitarianism is eurocentric</p> <p>Creation of humanitarian organizations that are independent from state and secular</p> <p>Respect for state sovereignty</p>	<p>Refugee protection regime is dominated by Cold War ideologies NGO politics reflect political alignments in the "First World"</p> <p>Rise of intergovernmental, UN-led humanitarian action</p>	<p>Proliferation of international NGOs Emergence of Human Rights Organizations</p>	<p>Humanitarianism becomes global</p> <p>Washington Consensus Millennium Development Goals</p>	<p>humanitarianism becomes "terrestrial" (Latourian sense)</p> <p>Privatization of Aid</p>
Discourses	<p>Neutrality as independence from state action Neutrality to stabilize the collective</p>	<p>Neutrality through material aid as opposed to legal aid</p> <p>Self-sufficiency Rural development Durable solutions</p>	<p>Human flourishing over neutrality</p> <p>Humanist Critique of high-modernist planning (economic & spatial) Environmentalism Limits of growth Systems approach to planning</p>	<p>Neutrality through erasure of human judgment, through standardization and procedures</p> <p>Standardization Security/Containment Efficiency Mobility Temporality (Camp is also a discourse)</p>	<p>Neutrality through accounting, through artificial intelligence (black box of algorithms)</p> <p>Smart salvation (smart cities) Localization (rhetorical return of place) Democratization & participation Resilience</p>
Representations	<p>The Urban</p>	<p>Urban bias (urbanization = progress/rowth)</p>	<p>Rampant urbanization as threat to biological systems Urban risks as subset of environmental risks</p>	<p>avoided/denied "outside"</p> <p>Technology reduces physical distance; technology organizes action. Management, accountability, transparency Efficiency Logframes</p>	<p>Informal Cahotic/accelerated Crisis-driven</p> <p>Technology as "artificial intelligence" (algorithms); Technology as invasive (Biometric data); Technology as democratizing (data sharing platforms)</p>
Identities	<p>object of humanitarian expertise</p> <p>Soldier hors de combat, prisoner</p> <p>Doctors, nurses, societies of volunteers, philanthropists, statisticians</p>	<p>Technical expertise is transferable is subordinated to politics</p> <p>The subaltern, the poor</p> <p>Engineers</p>	<p>"Appropriate Technology". Humanitarian should be low-tech, low-energy</p>	<p>The securitized, the threat, the other</p> <p>Managers & Bureaucrats</p>	<p>Data points Migrants, Labors</p> <p>Technologists, digital volunteers, philanthropists</p>

Figure 2 - The Socio-technical imaginaries of humanitarian urbanism

Chapter 4 Humanitarian Planners in the “Century of the Unsettled Man”

“for a refugee, the only really human settlement is one in which he can cease to be a refugee, or better still, need not become one”

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (1976)

Opening

In August 1974, Gilbert Jaeger, the Director of Assistance at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), one of the world’s largest humanitarian organizations, casually declined an invitation to attend the first ever global conference on the topic of human settlements.

Scheduled to take place in Vancouver in the summer of 1976, the UN Human Settlements Conference was convened to tackle worries about rampant urbanization and its frightening prospects both in the developing and developed world. As the organizers defined it, the notion of human settlement “*embraced all kinds and sizes of human communities and all their needs for a healthy existence.*” The idea had sprouted from another recent United Nations gathering, the World Environment Conference held in Stockholm two years earlier, which had offered members of the international community a first common platform to discuss issues of environmental governance. Habitat¹ —as the Vancouver Human settlements conference would come to be known— sought to

¹ The conference would eventually lead to the creation of UN-Habitat, the eponym UN agency exclusively devoted to urban questions.

tackle the connection between the built environment and unjust economic and social relations, a connection that was deemed, for the first time in post-war international circles, “fundamental for the quality of life of the world’s people.”

In a nonchalant four-sentence letter to the conference organizers, Gilbert Jaeger justified the UNHCR’s turndown by invoking how little involved his agency was with the issues Habitat planned to address²: the UNHCR was in the refugee, not the human settlement, business, and it saw little link between the two. To an observer of the material world in the early 1970s, Jaeger’s position would have appeared at odds with the reality of UNHCR’s operations on the ground. Indeed, in 1974, 70% of UNHCR’s budget was spent on what could easily be described as settlement activities: from Africa to Nepal, the agency was creating from scratch new rural communities for thousands of refugees. This “humanitarian work” included the construction of schools, health centers, markets, and other social and economic infrastructure.

Why then the reluctance on the part of UNHCR to engage with the larger issue of urbanization? And how would the run-up to the Habitat Conference eventually alter the agency’s position on spatial planning?

² UNHCR Archives Fonds 11 Series 2 File 391.3. Letter to Deputy Secretary-General, D. A. Turin

4.1 Part I: Habitat

This chapter attempts to answer these questions by proposing a brief historical narrative of the convergence between humanitarian action and urban development broadly construed, which I refer to as humanitarian urbanism. In this short history, international humanitarian organizations are studied as planning institutions; and humanitarian planning is presented as a technology of aid. This case offers a view into the co-constitution of humanitarian ethics and technological expertise around urban, spatial and environmental problems. It provides an example of the shifting ways in which moral, political, legal and scientific rationalities intertwine during humanitarian crises and mass displacement.

Establishing this chronology is essential to understanding the crucial role that emergency relief organizations have in transforming places and land uses in cities and territories the world over. As chapter 2 indicated, to date, most conversations about humanitarian spatiality have been moored to the present and framed around the notion of the camp.³ The humanitarian camp is generally treated not only as a temporary planning model, but also as an ahistorical concept. In other words, the camp is both an impermanent settlement, and a spatial model so generic that it does not require historicizing. In the world of practice, even policies framed as ‘alternative to camps’ have essentialized the camp as the perennial rule for humanitarian space-making. Coupled to the general neglect of history within humanitarian studies, this view has obscured a more complex

³ See Chapter 2.

understanding of spatial humanitarian practices as they developed over time, in the interstice between political, moral and technological reasons.

4.1.1 *Summary*

Centered on the UNHCR as a case study, this chapter begins with the geographical expansion of humanitarian action from Post-war Europe into the “Third World” in the 1960s. This expansion was accompanied by a rapid and massive shift from a humanitarian regime based on legal protection to one based on material assistance and in-kind relief, which could be qualified as a “material turn”. Although physical planning remained absent as a formal category of practice, the “material turn” gave rise to spatial practices aligned with development models and indicative of new levels of attention accorded to urban questions in global governance circles. This culminated with the Vancouver Human Settlement Conference of 1976, which came to be known as the “Habitat” conference. I argue that Habitat was a pivotal moment during which humanitarian organizations came to realize that spatial policy and physical infrastructure was indeed crucial to their mandates to safeguard of the lives and dignity of war victims and refugees. This moment signaled three important changes in the wider humanitarian polity. First, it prompted the formulation of a new area of concern for the international community, around issues of urbanization and place-making. Second, it gave rise to the idea that humanitarian planning, if indeed there was such a thing, ought to be holistic, integrative and adopt a longer view of social and environmental systems. Third, it launched the institutionalization of spatial practices and spatial expertise as a formal category of practice in the repertoire of international humanitarian organizations.

This pivotal moment seems at odds with what we have come to expect of humanitarian place-making since. Describing the evolution of humanitarian spatial technologies in the aftermath of Habitat, from the 1980s through to the 2000s, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the ascent of efficiency and securitization concerns, responsible for the wide dissemination of the camp model as a now-crucial tool for humanitarian action.

4.2 The Material Turn in Humanitarian Aid (1950-60s)

In 1974, at the time of UNHCR's initial rebuff, the organization was nearing its twenty-fifth anniversary. In the last decade alone, it had grown from a small, Eurocentric, non-operational agency to being one of the world's largest humanitarian organizations. But when it had been formed in the early 1950s, the scope of its activities was quite narrow, circumscribed by geographical, temporal and operational constraints. This section explores the agency's origins as a normative regime based on legal expertise and the subsequent shift to a more complex model steeped in material and technological rationalities.

4.2.1 Normative Origins

The office of UN High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) was established in January 1951, to provide international protection to refugees and seek permanent solutions to the problem of refugees, under the auspices of the United Nations. As per its Statute, the work of the High Commissioner was to be humanitarian, social and of an entirely non-political character. Its creation was related to the adoption of the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* —the central

instrument of refugee law adopted by the United Nations in 1951— which at the time, defined the category of people entitled to the refugee status to apply narrowly to Europeans still displaced by World War II⁴ or fleeing social and political persecution in the Eastern bloc at the onset of the Cold War⁵. Whereas the convention was meant to endure, the office of UN High Commissioner for Refugee was not. It was intended to be dismantled within a period of three years.

The UNHCR was succeeding other international organs who had been in charge of orchestrating the massive emigration of World War II refugees. It was also competing with other bodies and programs serving similar functions⁶. Besides being constrained in time, the new agency was also limited in scope, as states were “determined (...) to restrict their own obligations to costly refugee resettlement”.⁷ As a defining feature, UNHCR was initially denied a role in the administration of material assistance programs. Focused on promoting the legal aspects of the international refugee protection regime —making sure that the rights of refugees would be protected by whichever country of asylum they found themselves in—, the agency was designed to remain non-

⁴ “There were displaced persons who, because of age, illness, or the wrong profession, were considered undesirable to resettlements countries” and had not resettled. See Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: A Perilous Path* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54.

⁵ It implicitly excluded people displaced by other large-scale tragedies, such as the Partition of India in 1947 or the Palestinian Nakba in 1948. It would take more than 15 years for these temporal and geographic limits to be removed via the 1967 Protocol which dropped the 1951 clause and universalized the definition of refugee as we know it today. See Gil Loescher, *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): The Politics and Practice of Refugee Protection into the Twenty-First Century*, Global Institutions Series ; 23 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008). See also Philippe Ryfman, *Une histoire de l’humanitaire, Repères* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).

⁶ UNHCR was the third of three attempts to create an inter-governmental body responsible for refugees, succeeding UNRRA (the United Nation Relief and Rehabilitation Agency), abolished in 1947, and the IRO (the International Refugee Organization), terminated in 1950.

⁷ Loescher, *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*.

operational, and thus funded accordingly, which is to say, sparingly⁸. Its main functions consisted of negotiating diplomatic and legal agreements with countries of asylum to facilitate the emigration and overseas resettlement of the remaining European refugees in third countries, mostly in North and South America⁹.

Which is not to say that the issue of housing, along with broader questions of public welfare, had been lost on those drafting the UN Refugee Convention. Working on the legal text in the wake of the Second World War, country representatives to the preparatory committee had expressed doubts about the viability of including a housing clause in the text. *“Regarding any reference to the question of housing,”* the British representative explained, *“it would be difficult to guarantee exactly equal treatment for refugees on the matter of housing, since the housing shortage [is] acute and the matter [has] to be dealt with on the basis of need.”*¹⁰

⁸ In addition to Loescher and Ryfman, 40-41; see Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 102. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Final Report on the Ford Foundation Program for Refugees, Primarily in Europe, Implemented by Voluntary Agencies and Administered through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* (Geneva: UNHCR, 1958).

⁹ In progress note: In organizing resettlement to third countries, the line between refugees and economic migrants was blurred. UNHCR probably inherited biopolitical practices from its predecessor UNRRA, which used to screen displaced individuals for eligibility for economic migration. This means that in addition to defining legal guidelines, early refugee protection workers also participated in creating refugees’ identities, and norms of normality/abnormality (physical, but also social and moral). See Laure Humbert for more.

¹⁰ Whether or not provisions for material welfare should be included in the convention had been a hotly debated topic during the preparatory works. The issue had exacerbated a rift between Western states, pitting the United States and the UK —protected from large refugee flows by geographic features— against France and the Benelux countries, more exposed to massive arrivals from the East, and thus keener to include some written provisions for relief or material assistance of some sort should large influxes occur again. See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “The Refugee Convention, 1951: The Travaux Préparatoires Analysed with a Commentary by Dr. Paul Weis,” 1990.

Finally, it should be noted that the legal refugee apparatus itself was established on the basis of individual rights, and thus removed for concerns with the “public” or the common good. The negotiations leading to the writing of both the UN Refugee convention and the UNHCR’s own statute had determined that refugees were *individuals* fleeing persecution due to *individual characteristics* (racial, religious, national, political or social) determined on a case-by-case basis. UNHCR was therefore reluctant to think of refugee protection in terms of populations or collectives, or anything on a group scale. While this could seem counterintuitive in the wake of a World War that had caused the displacement of millions, we must recall that at the time of writing the refugee convention, refugee movements were no longer thought of as emergencies; in 1950, five years after the end of the war, it was assumed that the need for exceptional and urgent relief had passed. To be sure, dealing with massive groups of people was precisely the kind of overwhelming ordeal that Western states were hoping to avoid in the future, granted that their new international governance tools would work as planned.

4.2.2 *Durable Solutions and The State*

Historical accounts reveal that the choice to overlook the material dimension of humanitarianism was also contextual. Indeed, Western European states, who were in the midst of massive reconstruction and housing development programs in large part funded by the Marshall plan, had been able to absorb the refugees that had not emigrated overseas.¹¹ In such a context, it was therefore realistic to assume that planning, housing, community organization, and any other form

¹¹ See Loescher (2008).

of material protection for refugees rested firmly within the purview of the receiving states, and that international assistance would remain of ancillary nature. This early attitude is reflected in the UNHCR's archives, in the agency's response to requests for material assistance for a refugee housing project in Europe.¹²

This view had led, early on, to the formulation of “durable or permanent solutions” to refugee problems. This notion, which has underwritten UNHCR's modus operandi to this day, established three such solutions: 1) voluntary repatriation (to the country of origin), 2) resettlement (to a third country) and 3) local integration (in the country of asylum). Interestingly, local integration was envisioned last, and originated in response to the fears of unrest caused by the East German Refugee crisis of 1953 and the Hungary uprising in 1956. For the first time, through a Ford Foundation Grant, the first private grant it ever received, UNHCR had been thrown closer to the ground and confronted with community planning questions. But even though the event had pushed the UNHCR to expand its repertoire beyond resettlement advocacy, UNHCR's role remained one of coordination (through local NGOs), and not of direct project implementation. As a result, it did not formulate any type of planning policy.

¹² This early attitude is reflected in the following response by the budding UNHCR to a request for material assistance for a refugee housing project in France in 1960: “The financing of the projects should continue to be based on the principle that international assistance is of ancillary nature and that the basic responsibility for refugees within a given territory rests with the respective government. Accordingly, the financing of each project should include a considerable amount of supporting contributions from governmental and other French sources.” UNHCR Records of the Central Registry 1956-1962, Fonds 11, Serie, file 11/1-27/5/1/FRA 07/1959-03/1961 “1960 Programme - Submission of projects - France (Outside camp refugees)”

4.2.3 *A Material Solution to a Political Impasse*

The decolonization conflicts that erupted in the 1960s drove a rapid expansion of the UNHCR's activities into the 'Third World.' As it widened its geographic scope, the agency began to discount the root causes of population displacement and to favor the provision of direct in-kind relief over formal legal activities.¹³

As discussed, the normative apparatus set up in the 1951 Refugee Convention, albeit universal in language, was Eurocentric and ideological in essence. As they entered the decolonizing world, not only did humanitarian actors confront new forms of violence and forced displacement *en masse* (as opposed to on an individual scale, as had been the case in the East-West European dynamic¹⁴), they also faced a brand-new geopolitical chessboard. On it, lay a set of new dilemmas that exposed the limits of the legal humanitarian instruments designed just a decade earlier. One such dilemma concerned whether or not the legal definition of refugees should be universalized, and extended to the victims of national liberation wars or civil or ethnic rife erupting in the wake of decolonization. Labelling these people as "refugees" would have meant admitting that they were victims of persecution, as the original legal definition entailed. This would have meant recognizing that either the Western powers (the former colonial powers, who had themselves created the refugee protection regime) or the newly independent states (in the process of joining the United Nations on relatively equal footing), were persecuting the citizens they were otherwise expected to protect.

¹³ Loescher (2008). See also Gatrell, *The making of the modern refugee*.

¹⁴ A notable exception is the Hungarian refugee Crisis, which prompted the Ford Foundation to disburse a grant to UNHCR.

While it was convenient for United Nations members to frame East-West European refugee flight as a response to persecution by communist regimes, in the context of decolonization in Africa and Asia, extending the refugee protection legal regime as it would have, in many instances, amounted to self-incrimination.

In order to expand geographically and continue to pursue their humanitarian project, all while minimizing political embarrassment, the intergovernmental aid agencies turned to material assistance as a provisional, pragmatic, yet vital compromise to the political conundrum. British historian Peter Gatrell notes how this gave the UNHCR, but also NGOs and other international organizations, an opportunity to gain greater legitimacy as well as establish their public profile. He writes that far from being disinterested parties, “[their] expanding machinery of humanitarian intervention discounted the root causes of population displacement and turned the refugee into a kind of blank slate on which could be written plans for integration and development or repatriation.”¹⁵

With this began what we could call a “material turn”: a radical shift from a legal protection regime towards a material regime where assistance was the new organizing principle for humanitarian action. This shift opened a rift within humanitarian discourse and practice, separating legal protection from material assistance operations into two parallel branches —a dichotomy that pervades to this day, both inside individual organizations and within the larger humanitarian ecosystem, wherein humanitarian NGOs often self-segregate according to one of the two modes

¹⁵ Gatrell also crucially points out that NGOs claimed the right to speak on behalf of the refugee. Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 250.

of intervention. Running much deeper than a mere organizational division, this schism is at the core of the larger question that my work seeks to address, namely, the hierarchical relation between legal/humanist and technological expertise within the design and production of humanitarian instruments and policies.

The material turn established a new mode of legitimation within aid, one that is relevant to the planning question. It produced a change from a discourse articulated around political persecution to a discourse articulated around basic needs. This institutionalization of materially oriented humanitarianism would eventually be criticized by the like of the ICRC, whose views on humanitarian action had historically been much less compromising. To this day, critics still lament the reductionist conflation of humanitarianism with material relief, a move that is seen as distorting and diminishing the meaning and power of the humanitarian gesture.¹⁶

4.2.4 *Field Experts*

As the provision of basic needs in the “Third World” became central to the humanitarian project, the technical instruments of humanitarian aid came to be interwoven with the instruments of

¹⁶ Hugo Slim, amongst others, sees aid based only on material relief as a distortion of the Humanity principle – one of the seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross Movement. He views it as a heresy that “caricatures humanitarianism as an essentially materialistic concern for physical welfare, manifested in the provision of a range of commodities such as food, water, shelter, and medicine. This commodification of humanitarianism and its subsequent reduction to a package of ‘humanitarian assistance’ is a serious heresy which undermines wider humanitarian values. To interpret humanitarianism as an essentially minimalist endeavor relating to simple human survival is a misreading of its first principle. The Geneva Conventions are full of civil and political rights, as well as rights relating to simple physical survival. Restricting humanitarian concerns to relief commodities precludes many other vital aspects of the Geneva Conventions which relate to ... notions of liberty and happiness.” Hugo Slim, “Relief Agencies and Moral Standing in War: Principles of Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality and Solidarity1,” *Development in Practice* 7, no. 4 (November 1, 1997): 345.

development. The “field” became their new terrain of intervention. Evoking the disaster zone, the remote, the rural, the periphery and the non-West all at once, the nascent concept of the “field” embodied a distinct relationship to local environments and local stakeholders.¹⁷

A review of general internal reports as well as memos and organigrams kept in UNHCR’s archives shows that for UNHCR, the move to the field produced a new division of labor within the agency, and established a hierarchy between the Headquarters located in Geneva and New York, and the field offices, dispersed everywhere else in the world. UNHCR’s protection branch remained home to legal and political experts; while the assistance branch began expanding and recruiting generalists to oversee the projects that the agency was implementing through third parties, such as local organizations or international NGOs. Although bound by decisions emanating from the headquarters, field officers had to be independent and versatile in their skills. This organizational structure set the stage for the production of situated (or rather, dislocated or pluri-situated) knowledge and practices.

Of course, UNHCR’s newly minted humanitarian field workers were neither the firsts nor the only ones to land in the field. Philippe Ryfman explains that the third world’s “suffering” had long been the domain of colonial specialists, whose expertise was sought out by the new humanitarian NGOs born in the 1950s and 60s.¹⁸ Used to dealing in “humanitarian” projects since the eighteenth and

¹⁷ It has been established, mostly by critical development scholars, that the language of the “field” served to flatten, the politically fraught terrain of post-colonization wars.

¹⁸ Ryfman, *Une histoire de l’humanitaire*, p.22.

nineteenth centuries, colonial experts who remained in the field during decolonization thus transmitted their approaches and experience with ‘humanitarian planning’ to the humanitarians.

It is important to emphasize this continuation to debunk the euro-centricity of humanitarian technical models. Regarding planning and spatial organization, historian Bronwen Everill offers a persuasive rebuttal to the conventional view that African refugee settlements had their roots in Second World War Europe planning practices. Instead, her history of nineteenth century anti-slavery settlements in Sierra Leone, Kenya and South-Africa shows that the combination of humanitarian aims with the introduction of education and “legitimate commerce” (in the form of agriculture) – with the goal to ensure economic self-sufficiency as well as reform – was already present in nineteenth century ‘humanitarian planning’ by British missionary societies, and other anti-slavery advocates. Her argument goes well beyond planning per se, and extends to humanitarian governance more generally. She writes,

“the tools of governance, control and humanitarian action were in use, however, long before the Second World War and, in fact, most likely have more to do with the shaping of responses to African displaced populations than European post-war developments. Although European refugee camps have an obvious lineage in Europe, African sites should have an African refugee lineage as well. An analysis of the deeper history of humanitarian relief and settlement plans (...) reveals the gradual development of the model and its emergence as a model for humanitarian intervention in Africa.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Bronwen Everill, “Freetown, Frere Town and the Kat River Settlement: Nineteenth Century Humanitarian Intervention and Precursors to Modern Refugee Camps,” in *The History and Practice of Humanitarian Intervention and Aid in Africa*, by Bronwen Everill and Josiah David Kaplan (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 25.

From the end of the 1960s to the early 1970s, UNHCR's budget jumped from \$9M in 1960 to \$75M in 1975. In the early 1970s – at the time when it was debating whether or not to attend the Habitat conference – the agency was spending roughly 70% of its budget on “settlements” activities, including the creation, from scratch, of entire rural villages for refugee communities in the countries hosting them. The first such settlement on record was established in 1961 for Rwandese refugees in Zaire; and 130 such settlements would be set up through UNHCR assistance between the 1960s and the mid-1980s²⁰. An important, yet paradoxical feature of these highly top-down planning practices was the focus on the self-sufficiency of refugees. The importance of fostering “self-sufficiency” amongst refugee groups was repeatedly invoked and juxtaposed to the fear of creating a “dependency syndrome”. At the same time, few opportunities for self-determination or self-governance appear in the reports and evaluations of these projects. Echoing the colonial language of “reform through settlement”, the first generation of humanitarian field officers promoted top down relief planning as a means to avoid “fateful refugee congestions” and “total and permanent dependence”. These positions were reflected in practice by the choice to exclude expenditures on housing, in favor of expenditures on “food, seeds, agricultural tools and machinery, tents and infrastructure for education, health, agriculture and water.” Finally, while there was an explicit recognition that “settlements programmes [were] only undertaken with the full agreement and collaboration of the governments concerned”,²¹ little agency appeared to be given to local governments.

²⁰ APFEL Evaluation study on “Refugee Settlement and Settlement Assistance Programmes” Report 1987, UNHCR Archives Fonds 11 Series 3 File 590.2. It would be possible to use the appendix in the document to separate pre-1976 figures.

²¹ ‘Note on UNHCR Activities in the Field of Human Settlements’, dated 9 April 1975. Fonds 11, series 2, File 11/2/39-391.3

In sum, the “material turn” marked the onset of unprecedented technical humanitarian *practices* on the ground, in ways that altered the nature of humanitarian action. Material relief was promoted as a form of humanitarianism that rested less on the legal protection of specific individuals, and more on meeting the basic needs of undifferentiated groups. Humanitarian planning emerged in concert with the later, aligned not only with efflorescent development models, but also with former colonial notions of reform. In discussions about what humanitarian actors should or should not do, the newly independent States, whose newly sovereign territories were defined through human displacement and human strife, had less weight than their “First World” counterparts, who were providing humanitarian funds. Moreover, the geographical expansion –across continents– was creating the needs for new communication technologies (as will be discussed further below) and new organizational structures that were often very hierarchical.

And yet, these new modalities did not get inscribed in official humanitarian discourse, nor encoded in official policy documents. It would take the Habitat Conference, and the wider recognition of urbanization as an issue of global concern, for planning to become articulated and integrated into UNHCR’s humanitarian mandate as full-fledged technology of aid.

4.3 The Birth of Habitat and The Fear of the “Unsettled Man” (1970s-1980s)

In 1974, preparations for the UN Human Settlements Conference scheduled to take place in Vancouver in the summer of 1976 as the first ever global conference on the topic of urbanization were gathering momentum. The conference aimed to “set out guidelines for national and international action to improve the living places of people throughout the world.”²² Habitat, as the conference would come to be known, was an offshoot of the Human Environment conference held in Stockholm in 1972, where the members of the United Nations had begun to grapple with a newfound earth consciousness, a reckoning of the interconnectedness of the world’s nations and environmental systems,²³ and of the planetary scale as a scale of intervention. The idea behind Habitat was to emphasize the relationship between human settlements and unjust economic and social relations in both the developed and developing worlds.²⁴

The built environment was being brought to the fore as a strategic site of global intervention to create a better world. Rather than speaking of urbanization per se, the conference organizers has chosen the broader terminology of “human settlements” and “human habitat,” which they had defined holistically, as a novel concept that:

²² UN Yearbook 1976, p. 441

²³ The Stockholm and Habitat conferences were premised on the recognition of the planetary scale and the understanding of humanity at large, embodied in the idea of earth consciousness. Felicity Scott has offered the notion of ‘environmentality’ to outline to “the techniques and policies for monitoring and managing environment and populations” that emerged at the time. Her work is in dialogue with Michel Foucault contemporaneous work on biopolitics and governmentality, and provides helpful context for understanding the formulation of a global governance regime around environmental issues, of which the question of urbanization was a subset.

²⁴ The conference noted that “the condition of human settlements largely determines the quality of life, the improvement of which is a prerequisite for the full satisfaction of basic needs, such as employment, housing, health services, education and recreation.” Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements, 1976.

“embraced all kinds and sizes of human communities and all their needs for a healthy existence (...) ranging all the way from a nomad encampment to a great metropolis, with their common denominator being the people in them and their requirement for life support systems such as shelter, water, communications, transport, energy (...) that is all components of a dignified existence [and] everything that is fundamental for the quality of life of the world’s people.”²⁵

4.3.1 *Planning as a New Technology of Development*

The language and framing of Habitat echoed contemporaneous critiques of development, particularly those lamenting the narrow economic views that pervaded the field. For the authors of the Conference Preparatory Report, it was clear that the economic thinking –both in public and private spheres– had lacked a sufficiently broad and human definition of costs and benefits, and as a result was leaving out of the equation all the externalities that radically distorted the impact of development²⁶. Part of Habitat’s objectives was thus to remedy this flaw and advocate for a better and fuller analysis of development that would account for these social and environmental costs, relying on more comprehensive measures and more accurate models²⁷.

To some degree, Habitat’s vision was reminiscent of a systems approach to planning and the environment, in so far as it framed cities and regions (i.e. settlements) in a socio-economic

²⁵ UNHCR Archives Fonds 11 Series 2 File 391.3 Vol. 1-2. HCR internal report addressed to Charles Mace, Deputy High Commissioner, dated 18 February 1975.

²⁶ Excerpts from Barbara Ward’s Preparatory Report on Habitat, in Thomas, H., & Guardian Business Services (London). (1976). Places for people. London: London : Guardian Business Services. Pp.1/4-1/5.

²⁷ The goal of Habitat was then to urge governments to make human settlements programs a priority in their national development plans.

language, treating them as a complex system of inter-related activities in near constant flux.²⁸ Only this time, under the auspices of the United Nations, the settlement/habitat system was envisioned at the global scale.

This systems-inspired approach to human settlement served to establish an important link between the built environment and global development²⁹. Human settlements, and, by extension, physical planning techniques, were presented as both instruments and objects of development. The idea was that healthier, wealthier and more peaceful settlements, achieved through better (and more humane) planning techniques, could remediate unjust economic and social relations within the developed and developing worlds, and between both. “There is no single policy that deals more adequately with full resource use, an abatement of pollution, and even the search for more labor-intensive activities than a planned and purposive strategy for human settlements.”³⁰ In this quote from Barbara Ward’s *Only One Earth*, the work that would provide much of the intellectual framing for Habitat, planning was portrayed as a technological crucible of sorts – the system that ordered all (or most) other systems.

In addition, and perhaps paradoxically, Habitat reflected several critiques of top-down comprehensive urban planning, the failures of which had started to be felt in cities of the developed

²⁸ Peter March 19-Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design since 1880*, Fourth edition. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

²⁹ “The goals of settlement policies were inseparable from the goals of every sector of social and economic life, and the solutions to these problems of human settlements had therefore to be conceived as an integral part of the development process of individual nations and the world community.” UN Yearbook 1976, pp. 442-443.

³⁰ Ward, B. (1972). *Only one earth: the care and maintenance of a small planet* ([1st ed.]). New York: Norton. p. 180.

world. In discourse, at least, the conference's focus was on the human scale, the human experience, and the future of the human race. Kurt Waldheim, the United Nations Secretary General, remarked in his opening statement, that the central theme of the conference was "*concern for people – where and how they lived, the quality of their lives and the future for themselves and generations yet unborn.*" Prime-Minister Pierre Eliot Trudeau, the head of the government hosting the conference, would speak of the complex link between human settlements and human existence itself³¹. Public participation, through the direct involvement of citizens in the planning process, would be prominently featured in the Conference's recommendations to governments.³² Attendant to the human component, was the notion of place, or rather of "places for people," an approach necessary to ensure the respect for local resources and local cultures.³³

4.3.2 *The Fear of the "Unsettled Man"*

Beyond the socio-economic critique and the somewhat utopian aspirations of Habitat, its call to action was also couched in a language of fear and impending doom, recalling the widespread worries of the time. In the wake of the first oil crisis, the limits of growth were revealing themselves to the world, and the tone was one of heightened risk: economic recession and depression, overpopulation and rampant destruction of the natural environment, scarcity, unemployment,

³¹ UN Yearbook 1976, pp. 442-443.

³² See the fifth category of "Recommendation for national action", Chapters II and XIV of the Conference Report.

³³ See Thomas "Places for People" (1976). One might also hear distant echoes of Jacobs, J. (1961) or Davidoff, P. (1965), although the context and scale are radically different.

congestion, pollution, rural depopulation, nuclear warfare³⁴. Uncontrolled urbanization and the “extremely serious conditions”³⁵ of certain settlements were explicitly described as risks, potential disasters and looming emergencies demanding an urgent response —tropes that UNHCR was familiar with and able to latch onto.

As it debated whether or not it should participate in the global event, UNHCR leadership interpreted the anxieties of the settlement emergency bemoaned by Habitat into what it called the problem of “the unsettled man”. In a two-page report addressed to the Deputy High-Commissioner, dated 18 February 1975, Robert Schiffer, a specialist temporarily hired by UNHCR to review its position on settlement, articulates the problem as follows:

“while the immediate HCR concern is the result of emergency situations touched off by the unplanned movement and resettlement of people who have become refugees for a variety of reasons, its works and experience clearly have validity for the universal human settlement emergency that must be resolved by the end of the century if the next one is not to be the “century of the unsettled man”.”³⁶

Just as the Habitat organizers had linked urbanization with economic development and justice, so too did UNHCR began drawing connections between settlement development and its own humanitarian mandate to protect the lives and dignity of refugees. A review of internal correspondence between managers at UNHCR’s assistance unit in Geneva, and the offices of the

³⁴ See UN document A/Conf.70/BP/2 “Humanizing Settlements” by Ernest Weissman. 26 May 1976.

³⁵ Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements, 1976

³⁶ UNHCR Archives Fonds 11 Series 2 File 391.3 Vol. 1-2. HCR internal report addressed to Charles Mace, Deputy High Commissioner, dated 18 February 1975. Another memo in the same file indicates that Schiffer had been personal assistant to Maurice Strong, Secretary General of the [United Nations Conference on the Human Environment](#) in early 1970s, and it can be assumed that he was fluent in the language and able to translate it for UNHCR.

High Commissioner and Deputy High Commissioner, and including memos to the regional office in New York as well as with the Habitat Conference Secretariat, from August 1974 to September 1975 indicate that two fundamental realizations emerged. On one hand, the problem of refugeeness was diagnosed as an externality of the (flawed) global socio-environmental system. On the other, planning was now being recognized as a valid instrument of humanitarian action and disaster prevention. By providing a holistic spatial response to refugee problems, humanitarians would help prevent the catastrophe predicted by the Habitat and Stockholm Conferences; they would offer a “contribution to solving the universal problem of how human beings can co-habit peacefully on this planet.”³⁷ After all, “for a refugee, the only really human settlement is one in which he can cease to be a refugee, or better still, need not become one.”³⁸

4.3.3 *The Birth of the Humanitarian Planner*

Progressively, a consensus emerged that although “the pressure of work and the lack of proper and independent evaluation system within [UNHCR]” had prevented it from gathering “from [its] experience all the social and economic lessons that could be derived from them,” the conference provided a timely pretext to do so.³⁹ UNHCR finally agreed to participate in Habitat and chose as its main contribution the production of a film showcasing the construction of rural villages for refugees in Tanzania.

³⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (1976). *Refugees in human settlements*. Geneva: Geneva: UNHCR.

³⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (1976). *Refugees in human settlements*. Geneva: Geneva: UNHCR.

³⁹ UNHCR Archives Fonds 11 Series 2 File 391.3 Vol. 1-2. Letter from P. Coat to G. Jaeger, dated 27 January 1975.

Coupled to the internal debates and external consultations, the production of the film led to UNHCR recognizing that planning activities had in fact been a central feature of its assistance programs, and spurred the formulation of an explicit approach to planning within the agency. In its first official communications on the planning question, ‘*Refugees in human settlements*’, published immediately after the conference, UNHCR identified the myriad ways in which it had been doing “planning”:

“either inserting the refugee into the existing human settlement fabric, or creating, sometimes from scratch, an environmental framework within which the refugee can recreate a personality, become self-sufficient, and cease to be a burden on the local, national and international communities (...) also (...) resettling displaced persons uprooted within their own country (and) thus contributing to reducing the overcrowding of cities.”⁴⁰

In keeping with the spirit of Habitat, the approach and language were holistic and comprehensive. The publication broached a wide range of topics, including rural villages, urban refugees, reception centers and camps, but also the thornier matters of political representation, municipal taxation, participatory power, the meaning of home, and ‘anticipation of the unpredictable’.

4.3.4 *The Urban/Rural Divide*

Perhaps because it was so wide-ranging, the *vision* did not readily convert into granular physical planning *prescriptions* as such. For instance, there was little explicit indication of which specific planning model ought to be prioritized. If, rhetorically, the all-encompassing notion of

⁴⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (1976). *Refugees in human settlements*. Geneva: Geneva: UNHCR.

“humanitarian settlements” transcended the rural/urban divide, in practice, there seemed to exist an implicit bias towards the rural.

The years following Habitat mostly saw concerted efforts within UNHCR assistance division to elaborate and institutionalize “Refugee Aid and Development” (RAD) policies, as evidenced by technical reports, internal correspondence, and workshop proceedings of the time. Such policies promoted investments in so-called self-sufficient refugee settlements – rural sites which could be, after a few years of humanitarian support, seamlessly integrated into the regional planning and national development strategies of their host countries, and handed over (along with their residents) to development agencies or national governments. Obviously, the model aligned perfectly with UNHCR’s durable solutions ethos, and fostered greater cooperation with development actors. In contrast, the agency remained vague on how it would work to insert refugees into “existing human settlement fabrics,” particularly urban fabrics. In the view of former UNHCR Head of Policy Development and Evaluation, Jeff Crisp, biases against urban refugees were present from the start. It would be wrong to suggest that urban refugees were ignored –the topic is the object of several internal reports and white papers from the mid-1960s onwards– but, as Crisp states, they “were regarded and conceived as a problem, even by the most sympathetic commentators.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Jeff Crisp, “Finding Space for Protection: An Inside Account of the Evolution of UNHCR’s Urban Refugee Policy,” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* 33, no. 1 (March 23, 2017).

4.4 Part II: The Apogee of Standards (1980s-2000s)

The first convergence between aid and urbanism made possible in the Habitat moment foreboded issues that would become central to 21st century urban planning –amongst others, issues of risk anticipation, sustainability and spatial justice. However, the blossoming of this particular approach to human settlements within humanitarian circles would get interrupted somewhat abruptly. The end of the Cold War and the roll-out of economic austerity measures altered the perception that donor countries had of refugees and led, once again, to a reconfiguration of the scope and technological modalities of humanitarian planning, which this chapter section seeks to outline. Notably, they produced the camp and the notion of “shelter” as predominant spatial models. I argue that such models –which have now been elevated to the status *of norms* – emerged out of specific technological, geopolitical and ideological conditions. Far from being archetypal, perennial (and thus somewhat inescapable), they are historically contingent.

The final years and direct aftermath of Cold War saw a reframing of the development, humanitarian, and refugee protection projects. Refugees began losing their political appeal to former superpowers who no longer saw them as ideological victims, and part of their strategic agenda. As a result, migration, whether forced or voluntary, became increasingly securitized.⁴² Now portrayed as massive, illegal and threatening to an alleged status quo in the receiving

⁴² For a discussion on the securitization of refugees, See Anne Hammerstad, “Whose Security?: UNHCR, Refugee Protection and State Security After the Cold War.” *Security Dialogue* 31, no. 4 (December 1, 2000): 391–403; Anne Hammerstad, “Securitisation from below: The Relationship between Immigration and Foreign Policy in South Africa’s Approach to the Zimbabwe Crisis,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 12, no. 1 (March 2012): 1–30.; Guy S. Goodwin-Gill, *The Refugee in International Law*, 3rd ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

countries, refugee influxes confronted growing hostility. The gloomy drop in politically-motivated resettlement opportunities was compounded by a spread of new types of organized violence, sometimes termed “New Wars”,⁴³ erupting in the Balkans, the Middle East, East Timor and the African Great Lakes region – hostilities that were believed to be fueled in part by the large presence of refugees and of the humanitarians who assisted them.

The increasingly restrictive asylum climate was also stemming from new demographic make-ups and rescaling of welfare regimes in Western states. These socioeconomic changes produced the 1989 Washington Consensus, a set of economic prescriptions that sanctioned a new market-based approach to development and transformed the aid culture. New donor strategies pushed humanitarian organizations to lean towards standardization, monitoring, procedures and most of all, towards aid efficiency. At the UNHCR, this push led to an emphasis on repatriation (bordering on forced, or “imposed return”) as the preferred solution to the refugee problem. Repatriation went hand-in-hand with the broader move within the UN to seek to prevent displacement by attending to its root causes.⁴⁴

4.4.1 *The Urban Question in International Development and humanitarian Circles*

It is outside the scope of the present chapter to delve into a deep commentary on the important urban bias question – a theory that has animated the field of developmental economics for decades,

⁴³ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁴ Bradley, *Protecting Civilians in War*, 26–28.

which identifies a politically-inspired (distortion) of social and economic power between the countryside and the city, in favor of the latter.⁴⁵ Briefly, we could hypothesize that humanitarian actors, due to their proximity to development actors, were as inclined as them to correct for an “urban bias” in economic development practices, and thus direct their efforts and funds towards the rural. We could also hypothesize that in the case of UNHCR, the reluctance to engage with urban refugees lay more in the political clout that urban refugees were believed to possess.

In other words, that is was for political reasons –to protect their position of neutrality with host governments and host communities– that UNHCR did not promote clear urban development policies favoring urban refugees. For our present purposes, it might suffice to emphasize that through the 1970s and beyond, “urban” solutions consisted of protection activities, i.e. advocating for refugees’ rights, offering counselling services, and helping them “to complete their studies or acquire vocational skills, always aiming at employment and self-support⁴⁶”. In short, assistance activities involving the construction of hard infrastructure or the delivery of basic services were disproportionately happening in “rural villages” and not in cities, indicating perhaps a weaker presence of state institutions in countryside, as compared to cities.

⁴⁵ See Lipton, M. (1977) Why Poor People stay Poor, and Gareth A. Jones and Stuart Corbridge, “The Continuing Debate about Urban Bias: The Thesis, Its Critics, Its Influence and Its Implications for Poverty-Reduction Strategies,” *Progress in Development Studies* 10, no. 1 (January 2010): 1–18.

⁴⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (1976). Refugees in human settlements. Geneva: Geneva: UNHCR. Page 19.

4.4.2 *From Technical to Technocratic Planning*

The 1980s proved to be a pivotal decade for technical institutionalization and rationalization at UNHCR. The ambitious, comprehensive and longer-term Refugee Aid and Development (RAD) projects that had arisen out of Habitat, did not merely coincide with the wider efficiency trend that was taking off, they had also prompted a technical overhaul of humanitarian practices in their own rights. Professionalization and staff specialization had increased, fueled by the hiring of a widening range of technical experts, including specialists in the planning and management of agricultural projects,⁴⁷ economists, agronomists, civil engineers, sanitation experts, anthropologists, and eventually, architects and planners.⁴⁸ The wide geographic expansion of the organization created a need for higher-performance instruments of communication and control capable of circulating between decisional centers and the field.

In 1982, the first technical unit for specialists was created at UNHCR's Geneva headquarters, "to assume the responsibility for technical and specialized support in the organization". Initially named the Specialist Support Unit (SSU), the unit evolved into the Technical Support Section (TSS), and eventually the Programme and Technical Support Section (PTSS). TSS progressively introduced new planning and management instruments. New rubrics such as "Physical Planning" or "Settlements", which had not existed before, started to appear in the agency's organigrams.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ APFEL Report 1987, UNHCR Archives Fonds 11 Series 3 File 590.2

⁴⁸ I am purposefully leaving out medical professionals from this list of technical experts. Although doctors had long been part of humanitarian missions, particularly in Red Cross brands of humanitarian action, this was never the case for the UNCHR.

⁴⁹ It is important to recall that the appearance of these rubrics did not automatically translate into the creation of comprehensive knowledge bases on humanitarian planning. For a more detailed account that supports this view, See

Field missions – a process whereby TSS experts (professionals hired in the “first-world”) travelled to field offices to monitor program implementation – became more frequent. The accumulation of field mission reports led to the creation of inventories of technical knowledge, bigger databases, and the needs for new organizational logics.

A first “Project management system” was introduced in 1980, accompanied by an increasing interest in standards and manuals. A prime example of such manuals is the first “UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies” which was published in December 1982. The Handbook is a fascinating artefact because it distilled, on the one hand, the lessons learned from the prior decades, including the Habitat ethos, all the while heralding trends to come. Interestingly, compared with later editions, the original 1982 edition remained principle-based, suggesting little in terms of the quantified prescriptions that would take off with the Sphere Standards of the 1990s.

It should be noted that whereas the supporting technology at headquarters (e.g. audit, management, and most important, communication technology) aspired to be high-tech, program managers thought that the use of technology in the ‘field’ needed to remain appropriate and at a “low level of sophistication”.⁵⁰

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, “Architecture Culture, Humanitarian Expertise: From the Tropics to Shelter, 1953–93,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 3 (September 1, 2017): 384. Note #76.

⁵⁰ See UNHCR Archives Fonds 11 Series 3 File 391.45 “UNHCR is not directly involved in developing new technologies. Technologies applied in UNHCR assistance programmes usually are at an appropriate and low level of sophistication // UNHCR does not participate in NEST. It does however take advantage of new technologies in Telecom which are cost effective and suitable for its requirements.” Also see Stephen J. Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century*, Global and International History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Chapter 4 “When Small Seemed Beautiful: NGOs, Appropriate Technology, and International Development in the 1970s, 137-171.

4.4.3 *The Camps and the Shelters: The Last Bastion of High Modernism?*

In the 1990s, the “shelter,” a new relief item that was easy to distribute and measure (both in terms of quantity and specifications), and its corollary, the “camp”, emerged as prominent organizing rubrics within assistance activities. In the same way as the shelter was a rationalized, reductive version of a “house” or a “home”, the camp was a rationalized version of a human settlement.

Architectural historian Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi offers an illuminating take on the genealogy of shelter expertise in her history of the 1993 *First International Workshop on Improved Shelter Response and Environment for Refugees*. Her work attends to the “yet-unresolved tension between development and humanitarian relief, which, in architectural terms, has pitted ‘dwelling’ against ‘shelter’.” She argues that two types of expertise collide: on the one hand, the dwelling “[ennobles] the shared mission of architecture and humanitarianism”, on the other, the shelter “reduces [this mission] to functionalist, instrumentalized science.”⁵¹

Siddiqi notes a certain return, among the experts of the workshop, “to a disciplinary preoccupation with modern tropical architecture – especially hitching development and climate together as the social and scientific telos for building design and the rationalization for modern architecture”. Building on Siddiqi’s argument, I suggest that with the elevation of the shelter as the ‘issue area’, what we begin to see is architecture’s *problem solving* orientation triumphing over planning’s

⁵¹ Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, “Architecture Culture, Humanitarian Expertise: From the Tropics to Shelter, 1953–93,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 3 (September 1, 2017): 369.

reform orientation. In other words, coupled with securitization concerns⁵² and the quest for efficiency, the ready-made ‘shelter’ approach toppling the holistic “settlements approach” by taking out the developmental and self-sufficient dimensions out of the equation – two dimensions that were seen as unattainable in the new political and economic climate.

4.4.4 *Sphere, Clusters and Coordination*

Within the wider humanitarian community, several new organs and instruments were designed to improve coordination of an ever-increasing amount of data and activities, further emboldening the standardization culture. The Sphere Project, launched in 1997 to establish an internationally recognized set of “universal minimum standards,” is one example. Another example is the Cluster System, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) solution to streamline and systematize relief assistance into a system of neatly segregated sectors of intervention, such as water, protection, health, shelter, etc. The Cluster System, while a necessary and useful coordination mechanism, is an instrument that is fundamentally antithetical to planning, because, by design, it precludes interactions *between* sectors.

In sum, the types of spatial practices promoted by The Sphere Project, the Cluster System, and the overall technocratic ethos oriented the focus, not towards settlements as complex spatial entities,

⁵² To point out that camps are technologies of securitization and that they enable what many have called the “warehousing” of refugees close to the zones of conflict would be repetitive at best. Countless commentators have already discussed the issue at lengths. For an audience of designers, it might be worthwhile to recall that the term “warehousing” did not refer to the spatial form per se, or to forced encampment alone, but that it signified a more general denial of refugees’ rights, including the right to work and freedom of movement, which are guaranteed in refugee law. See U.S. Committee for Refugees’ Merrill Smith, on the campaign to end the warehousing of refugees.

boasting “all components of a dignified existence, fundamental for the quality of life of the world’s people,” but towards a more rationalized approach to the human habitat. Whereas they had been linked under the Habitat approach, development, environment, and “settlement” were now separated into distinct components.

The prescription of camps and shelters as the new spatial solution occurred in conjunction with the discredit of non-camp planning technologies as questionable humanitarian interventions. By tying humanitarian protection to spatial efficiency and containment, the new rationalized approach to planning portrayed as illegitimate refugees who were choosing to live outside camps, in other words, urban refugees. Jeff Crisp’s account of the evolution of UNHCR’s Urban Refugee Policy from the 1990s to the present makes very clear that refugee movement to non-camp areas was seen as irregular. Seeking refuge in cities amounted, for many within UNHCR, as economically driven migration, not forced migration, and therefore not deserving of humanitarian consideration.

4.4.5 *The Kit Culture*

The technocratic planning culture that took shape exacerbated the general tendency, within relief work, to seek technocratic and replicable solutions to complex social and political issues.⁵³

⁵³ Eleanor Davey and Kim Scriven, “Humanitarian Aid in the Archives: Introduction,” *Disasters* 39 (October 2, 2015): s113–28.

This development can be summarized into what medical anthropologist Peter Redfield has called the humanitarian “kit-culture”⁵⁴— an operational logic conflating technical standardization with ethical aims. In his critical ethnography of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Redfield traces the origins of the medical kit back to military medicine, notably the naval surgeons (“mobile healers”) chest and *Materia Medica Minimalis* (M.M.M.), “a baseline state of medical infrastructure.”⁵⁵

For Redfield, the kit is more than evidence of the professionalization of the humanitarian field, it is a logic of action. Through the kit, humanitarians can realize their ambition of reaching and stabilizing populations almost anywhere in the world within 48 hours.

But the kit goes beyond the medical. Including “pre-assembled, standardized “kits” of equipment, guidelines for responding to a variety of public health crises, and minimal forms of (...) evaluation,” kits are

“defined for a state of emergency, (...) limited by a concentrated concern for an uncertain present rather than an expansive future (...) [and] by their very design, not “sustainable,” no matter what greater hopes they might absorb or how lengthy their actual use life might prove.”

And yet, the kit is also a testament to the limits of humanitarian action, as it cannot support new expanded mandates to address specific diseases and broader inequalities. The kit, Redfield writes, constitutes “an institutionalization of closed settings,” which ignores local knowledge:

⁵⁴ Peter Redfield, *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors without Borders* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 88-90.

⁵⁵ Peter Redfield, “Cleaning up the Cold War: Global Humanitarianism and the Infrastructure of Crisis Response,” in *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War*, ed. Gabrielle Hecht, Inside Technology (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 270–74.

It represents a mobile, transitional variety of limited intervention, modifying and partially reconstructing a local environment around specific artifacts and a set script”

The humanitarian spatial practices described above – those that revolve around shelters, camps, and segregated sectors – conform to Redfield’s definition of a kit. They reflect technopolitics contingent on a reduced “moralistic ethos” and limited goals, and preclude the integration of interdependent social, economic and ecological dimensions into human settlements. Like the kits, the camp and the shelter are more than logistical tools or models, they have come to represent humanitarians’ “trademark of expertise,” to embody the humanitarian gesture. The key here is that kits and camps are not merely external signifiers of humanitarianism, they are how humanitarian experts see themselves, they “[represent] a self-consciously global system, in the sense of being mobile and adaptable worldwide”.⁵⁶

4.4.6 Conclusion

By taking a longer view and excavating a forgotten episode in humanitarian history, the goal of this chapter was to offer a rebuttal to the narrative that humanitarianism and urbanism have always been divorced. Contrasting the Habitat imaginary with the apogee of standards that came after it (the latter phenomenon having been arguably discussed and criticized time and time again) confirms the power that rationalization and standardization narratives have had over humanitarian

⁵⁶ Redfield, *Life in Crisis*, 88-90; as well as Redfield, “Cleaning up the Cold War”, 268–69.

spatial practices in the last twenty years. More importantly, it also shows that there are not one, but multiple socio-technical visions at play. This realization opens new avenues for humanitarian planning, and helps us discern where convergences are indeed possible.

Chapter 5 Smart Salvation: Crisis Mapping and The Return of Place

5.1 The Advent of Smart Salvation

This chapter deals with another, highly contemporary, point of convergence between humanitarianism and the science of cities: the reliance on spatial intelligence to plan interventions. In the humanitarian sphere, this spatial intelligence is embodied in the crisis mapping and geospatial localization tools that have started to proliferate in relief activities.

These new tools participate in the creation and enactment of a new socio-technical imaginary for humanitarianism that I call *the smart salvation imaginary*. Crisis mapping and geospatial localization are by no means the only technologies feeding this new imaginary; their increasing use only parallels that of emergency social media platforms¹, big-humanitarian data analytics, humanitarian block chain solutions², biometric tracking, mobile cash transfers (sometimes called ‘digital food’), augmented reality experiences of conflict zones³, and innovations in ‘artificial

¹ These, together with other humanitarian Information and Communication Technologies, constitute what many are calling HICTs, i.e. Humanitarian ICTs.

² For a useful summary of the on-going conversations about the uses of block chain technology for humanitarian action see Angela Wells and Lara Lopis, “Beyond the Hype: Blockchain for Humanity,” *Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs, Fordham University* (blog), October 2017. These include, among many other things, registration systems for identity or land ownership.

³ For an example of the use of Augmented Reality in humanitarian action, see “Searching for Syria”, a short video produced through a Google-UNHCR partnership, which uses drone and 360-degree imagery. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Syria Emergency,” UNHCR, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>. See also the New York Times Magazine 2015 issue on displacement, entitled “The Displaced,”

intelligence for good'. All these new tools have stormed the toolbox of humanitarian organizations over the past five to ten years, promising to save more lives with less, bring unquestionable accuracy to difficult decision-making, and speed up relief to victims of disaster, conflict and forced displacement.

In the process, they have triggered a new amalgamation of humanitarian values and humanitarian technological ideals. Unlike in prior socio-technical imaginaries discussed earlier in this dissertation, in the smart salvation imaginary, the merging of normative and technical repertoires is anything but tacit or antagonistic. Now more than ever, the humanitarian project to protect human dignity and human life is bolstered by technological codes that augment, if not surpass, moral ones.

The enthusiastic adoption of technological innovation needs to be understood in a context of constant redefinition or renegotiation of humanitarian legitimacy. (We should recall briefly that humanitarian legitimacy is anchored in principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence, as explained in the introduction and in chapter 3).

To understand how discourses of humanitarian neutrality and of planning are constructed in the smart salvation imaginary (and eventually what this all means for the production of space), I focus

which employs new filmmaking technology, recognizing that is “enables an uncanny feeling of connection with people whose lives are far from our own” by placing the reader within a crisis through a 360-degree environment that encircles the viewer. As the issue explains, “virtual reality creates the experience of being present within distant worlds, making it uniquely suited to projects ... that speak to our senses of empathy and community.” Jake Silverstein, “The Displaced: Introduction,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2015, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/magazine/the-displaced-introduction.html>.

on the spatial intelligence dimension of smart salvation, which includes, as just mentioned, crisis mapping and the uses of geo-located data in relief activities. I proposed to borrow insights from critical work on the smart city and digital navigation tools to illuminate my inquiry.⁴ Indeed, many parallels can be drawn between the phenomena of smart salvation and smart city. Obviously, both rely heavily on information and communication technologies (ICT) and spatial and geo-located representations, and both also involve a high degree of hybridization between moral, human, material, spatial and digital content and networks.

The chapter is organized as follows. It begins by looking at the different types of crisis-mapping that are produced, used and circulated in humanitarian circles. It then reviews the production of said maps, exploring what ingredients go into their making, and who fabricates them. After moving to an examination of the performative and governing functions of the crisis maps, the chapter concludes with two main propositions about the construction of legitimacy in the Smart Salvation imaginary. The first, is that *in the era of smart salvation, humanitarian neutrality resides in the triangulation and the algorithmic validation of data from a variety of sources and constituents, including vast networks of digital volunteers*. The second is that by equating localization with democratization, smart salvation claims to empower affected populations, but what it actually does is democratize aid institutions themselves.

⁴ In particular Antoine Picon, *Smart cities : théorie et critique d'un idéal auto-réalisateur*, Collection Actualités ; 22 (Paris: ÉdB2, 2013). Valérie November, Eduardo Camacho-Hübner, and Bruno Latour, "Entering a Risky Territory - Space in the Age of Digital Navigation," *Environment and Planning D* 28, no. 4 (2010): 581–99.

5.2 Geo-localizing aid

Before we move to a more critical discussion on the functions of crisis mapping for humanitarian organizations, it matters to define and survey what crisis mapping consist of, and what a ‘system of crisis maps’ looks like. The following is therefore not an attempt at cataloguing every possible type of crisis map, but a view into “the panoply of mutually reinforcing and mutually referential map images.”⁵

5.2.1 Maps

Crisis mapping involves ‘real time’ geo-located data that offers a spatial representation of needs and security during a crisis. Crisis maps are, for the most part, intended to be actionable, and provide the objective facts to help organizations make decisions and eventually policies. Like other types of data assemblage, the data assemblages that go into crisis mapping “involve an act of seeing and recording something was previously hidden and possible unnamed”.⁶ Perhaps the most common, most simple type of crisis map is the map of refugee settlements. The overwhelming majority of such maps use dots to show the location of camps, or of clearly delineated, official, sites of refuge settlements – with each dot presupposing legality and legibility by one form of government entity or another. Sometimes, the dots are clustered together, forming constellations of “extraterritorial enclaves” linked by “protected corridors that connect them with infrastructure

⁵ Camilo Arturo Leslie, “Territoriality, Map-Mindedness, and the Politics of Place,” *Theory and Society; Dordrecht* 45, no. 2 (April 2016): 172.

⁶ Sheila Jasanoff, “Virtual, Visible, and Actionable: Data Assemblages and the Sightlines of Justice,” *Big Data & Society* 4, no. 2 (December 1, 2017): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717724477>.

and transport centers.”⁷ Eyal Weizman refers to these clusters as ‘aid archipelago’⁸, connoting the fundamentally disconnected, unequal relationship that exist between humanitarian and local places.

In contrast, the more recent crisis maps that emerged during the Syrian Refugee crisis, particularly in Lebanon, adopted the nomenclature of heat maps, showing color gradients to represent the density of refugee presence in a given region. At the height of the Syrian war, Lebanon was hosting more than a million Syrian refugees (as well as Palestinian Refugees from Syria), a size equivalent to one fourth of its own population. Concurrently, the Lebanese government had adopted on a non-encampment policy, choosing to forbid the construction of official humanitarian camps for the Syrians crossing the border. In the gradient map, the fiction of humanitarian containment is dissolved, and the sense that the displaced are scattered all across the territory gets conveyed more accurately. The heat map tells a very different story about governance than the traditional maps. [SEE FIGURE 2].

A second type of crisis maps, those most resembling the live maps of the (peacetime) smart city, are the maps of essential services and of humanitarian distribution points: the maps showing the price of bread in Aleppo at the height of the urban fighting [SEE FIGURE 6 AND FIGURE 7], or the

⁷ Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, 56–57.

⁸ The term is far from innocuous. It is an echo of Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, published in 1973. With this reference, it seems that Weizman seeks to indict humanitarianism (and those who refuse to see its darker side), in the same way as Solzhenitsyn had forced Third-Worldists, and other communist sympathizers in Western Europe, to deeply rethink their relationships with the USSR, and consequently their own political and ideological project of human emancipation in the 1970s.

maps showing where the functioning water point remain after severe destruction of vital urban infrastructure [SEE FIGURE 8]. These maps can show humanitarian needs and humanitarian aid side by side, and more attention will be devoted to such juxtaposition later in the chapter.

A third genre of maps that often falls within the “crisis mapping” rubric is the ‘missing map’ or, the ‘first map’. Epitomizing this typology is the *Missing Maps Project*, an open collaborative project connected to the volunteer-driven open data mapping platform OpenStreetMap, and supported by its not-for-profit arm, the OpenStreetMap Foundation. The mandate of the Missing Maps Project is “Putting the World's Vulnerable People on the Map” in a manner that “emphasize building, and leaving behind local capacity and access.”⁹ This isn’t the only project of the sort. International aid donors have also begun to make mapping a priority, and have started to more systematically integrate mapping components into their aid programs across the globe. Take for example the cleverly named *Local Empowerment for Government Inclusion and Transparency Project*, or ‘LEGIT’ project, funded by USAID in Liberia. The LEGIT project is a partnership between Humanitarian OpenStreetMap and the Liberian Government to map “[cities] which have never had an official map”.

Another example of the first or missing map typology, is the map produced by volunteer youths in Burj-al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp in Southern Lebanon, close to Tyre. In its sixty more years of existence, the camp – which could easily be mistaken for a suburb of Tyre – had never

⁹ “Missing Maps,” accessed June 5, 2019, <https://www.missingmaps.org/>.

been mapped. The refugees had no representation of themselves in space. Since 1955, at the time of its creation, refugees, Lebanese authorities, and international organizations had progressively installed electricity (1969), running water (1972), and finally a sewage system (2004) in the camp, without a baseline map to guide them (and without recording their work on a map). It is only after a series of fires, during which the firefighting services had not been reach the burning houses in time absent a map, that the community came up with the idea of mapping their camp¹⁰. Using a rudimentary technology of balloon photography to help them draw parcels and locate public services, volunteers from the Beit Atfal Assumoud community based organization took it upon themselves to create what they eventually called “A Guide to our Community”.

In comparison to the interactive live maps, the ‘first’ or ‘missing’ maps are simple. They focus on marking administrative boundaries and service delivery infrastructure or points. What is most astonishing is not their technical sophistication, but the simple fact that they had never existed before. They instantiate what Camilo Arturo Leslie has called “map-mindedness,” in reference to the power of map imagery to elicit and dramatize political subjects’ claims to political and social recognition through the representation of their emplacement¹¹. Leslie writes,

“maps allow the political community to render itself more place-like, thus bridging the phenomenological distance between the community’s claimed territory and its ‘emplaced’ subjects... They present that territory as a body-like target for

¹⁰ Interview conducted by the author in Burj-al-Shamali, August 2015.

¹¹ Most authors who write about the legitimating power of maps focus on subjects’ claims to land and control over a territory. When it comes to ‘missing maps’ for refugees, I would argue that the claims are usually more modest: the map generally focuses on claims to basic services such as water, electricity, education, etc. Interestingly, in the larger scale site plan that accompanies Burj-al-Shamali map, the camp is situated in reference to the Palestinian villages of origin of the refugees, rather than in reference to the national boundaries of Lebanon.

identification ... and ... produce a multi-scalar sense of place that can be harnessed in the service of the political community.”¹²

One could argue that ‘missing maps’ are not really crisis maps, just plain maps. After all, don’t they simply perform the same function as other maps, producing or legitimating political subjects (and groups) and rendering their place of existence legible,¹³ genuine or real, *even lawful*?¹⁴ While this is true, there are two reasons for including them here. The first reason is practical: it is because their very production is triggered by crisis and often funded through crisis response budgets. Missing maps are thus an intrinsic part of relief efforts, participating in both emergency response and recovery. The second reason belongs to the representational. In other words, recognizing that missing maps are crisis maps amounts to recognizing that the crisis (re)creates the place. We know, from reading Sheila Jasanoff, that the disaster creates the groups, that is, that “victims of technological disaster do not constitute a clearly demarcated social group *until they are struck by tragedy*.”¹⁵ Indeed, disaster victims “possess no common identity, and hence no political voice or force that would allow them to declare in advance which hazards they are prepared to accept (...)

Reconstructing communities under such circumstances involves a very special and chancy kind of

¹² Leslie, “Territoriality, Map-Mindedness, and the Politics of Place,” 171.

¹³ The meaning of the proto-Indo-European root leg- (greek legein: "to collect, gather", to “speak or tell” and to provide evidence for its existence) is linked to latin lex- (law, as in collection of rules”). See *leg- | Origin and meaning of root *leg- by Online Etymology Dictionary. (n.d.). Retrieved June 5, 2019.

¹⁴ There is obviously a vast literature on the production of political subjectivity and nationhood through cartography, which has benefitted from the accrued attention and importance that social theory (and particularly political sociology) is now giving to the territory and to spatiality. See, *inter alia*, Cosgrove, Elden, Rankin. For pre-twentieth century discussion of ‘first maps’, see Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, particularly Chapter 10 “Census, Map, Museum”. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London ; New York ; Verso, 2006).

¹⁵ Emphasis added. For a deeper discussion of how categories of disasters create categories of victims, see Sheila Jasanoff, *Learning from Disaster : Risk Management after Bhopal*, Law in Social Context Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 9.

politics: the gradual accretion of power around a community of the dispossessed, whose only significant resource is the symbolic status engendered by their extraordinary suffering”.

A fourth typology of the ‘crisis map system’ is the satellite map. While satellite imagery does not constitute a map properly speaking, it is part and parcel of most crisis mapping projects, often providing the base onto which other data gets overlaid via machine or human. An example of a humanitarian platform relying on satellite imagery is the Satellite Sentinel Project (SSP). Launched in 2010 in collaboration with analysts from the Crisis Mapping and Early Warning Program at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, the SSP combined “satellite imagery, on-the-ground field reporting, and crisis mapping systems into a unified monitoring platform to detect, deter, and document threats to vulnerable populations” – it then released its reports, along with the imagery it produced, to the media and to policymakers around the world. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative qualified the project as “the development of ‘protective humanitarian’ technologies,”¹⁶ whose goal was to anticipate the risks of violence breaking out between Sudan and South Sudan, around the time the latter was seeking independence from the former. In the likelihood that violence would erupt, the SSP was intended both to predict threats to populations and to anticipate the quantity, type and locations where of humanitarian aid would need to be deployed. The SSP’s human analysts borrowed surveillance methods from the intelligence industry to interpret the imagery fed to them, and eventually carry on ‘humanitarian’ objectives, thereby combining or embodying humanitarian, legal and military crafts. More importantly, the SSP was supposed to assume the role of a super-witness of war crimes. As opposed to photography conventionally used to document

¹⁶ <http://hhi.harvard.edu/programs-and-research/crisis-mapping-and-early-warning/satellite-sentinel-project>

war crimes at ground level, the SSP could ‘see’ what the human eye could only imagine or envision through deductive processes, and thus, it could be relied on for providing more objective proofs that atrocities were being committed. By enlarging the vision of aid agencies, satellite imagery of the sort bolsters the witnessing power and the truth of the humanitarian testimony. It was also an attempt by humanitarian agents to mobilize hybrid capitals - more specifically, scientific capital and legal capital.

We could include two other types of geospatial crisis imagery. One is the “geographic preview” visualization option that is offered by large humanitarian data platforms. Such is the case of the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX), an open platform for sharing data across crises and organizations, which was created in 2014, and is managed by the Centre for Humanitarian Data at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in The Hague. HDX currently centralizes 9000 datasets, from more than 1100 different sources in more than 250 locations around the world, with the stated role of “ensuring that data is a force for good and benefits humanity¹⁷”. Among its multiple proposed visualizations methods (e.g. graphs and bar charts), HDX offers a cartographic way for users to visualize data as maps whenever possible. Related to the “geographic preview” is the synthetic or diagrammatic map that summarizes information about waves of displacements across a series of international borders, or within a country, to and from humanitarian camps and sites of refuge that might be considered informal (outside the conventional purview of aid agencies). The Euro or North-centric maps published by

¹⁷ Welcome - Humanitarian Data Exchange. Retrieved May 26, 2019, from Miriam Bradley, *Protecting Civilians in War: The ICRC, UNHCR, and Their Limitations in Internal Armed Conflicts*, First edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2, <http://id.lib.harvard.edu/aleph/014649555/catalog>.

western press outlets in 2015, as the Syrian Refugee Crisis was finally hitting the European shores, after having depleted the hosting capacities of its immediate neighbors, are examples [SEE FIGURE 3 AND FIGURE 4]. So are the maps of refugee secondary and tertiary movements within Jordan, compiled by aid agencies at the height of the Syrian Refugee influx in the Middle East [SEE FIGURE 9].

The final of geospatial crisis imagery is the computer-generated site plan, which provides a zoomed-in and more dynamic view into humanitarian settlements. These live site plans are the product of new partnerships between international aid organizations and private sector actors. Take for instance the new site layout software, Autodesk Civil 3D, created by the Autodesk Foundation in collaboration with UNHCR, which is said to have been tailored to the specific practices and context of humanitarian planning (the Autodesk Civil 3D software allegedly helped UNHCR “build a city for over 600’000 people in less than six months”). The software is supposed to take into account the short timeframes and fluid situations that humanitarian planners contend with, offering processing functions that help the UNCHR planners anticipate risks and prepare for contingencies (e.g. calculate where flooding will occur when the monsoon rains come). Its interface is also supposed to be simple enough to be used by people with varying degrees of technical training.¹⁸

¹⁸ Participant observations, Geneva, December 2018.

5.2.2 Data

It goes without saying that all these crisis maps rely on diverse and large amounts of data; we have just alluded to satellite imagery and humanitarian datasets as ones of multiple layers of information folded into crisis maps. The data comes from a wide range of sources, often originating from information exchange on social media platforms, actively contributed by bystanders or humanitarian personnel, or ‘given’ by state officials¹⁹.

The translation of crisis *data* into crisis *maps* requires complex data assemblage, involving a series of steps in the digital assembly line. Once mechanical and (mostly) human sensors have fed the crisis data into the system, the human eye is needed to interpret what the machine cannot. After human hands have classified and digitized the data, cyborgs – persons whose abilities are extended by mechanical elements – take care of the conflation, i.e. “the process of combining geographic information from overlapping sources so as to retain accurate data, minimize redundancy, and reconcile data conflicts.”²⁰ Finally, once they have been properly trained, algorithms perform the validation, through triangulations and other such ‘magic’ happening inside the black box.²¹

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a thorough overview of the critical debates surrounding data assemblage, it seems nonetheless important to remind the reader that the

¹⁹ João Albuquerque, Benjamin Herfort, and Melanie Eckle, “The Tasks of the Crowd: A Typology of Tasks in Geographic Information Crowdsourcing and a Case Study in Humanitarian Mapping,” *Remote Sensing* 8, no. 10 (n.d.): 1.

²⁰ Albuquerque, Herfort, and Eckle, “The Tasks of the Crowd.”

²¹ For more, see Büscher et al., for a breakdown of how geospatial data gets assembled by digital volunteers into four types of activity: gathering; reasoning; curating, stewarding and orchestrating; and finally, acting.

challenges posed by humanitarian data not only parallels, but also exceeds or exacerbates, those posed by ‘regular’ big data in terms of privacy, consent, surveillance, or algorithmic biases. While the promises of humanitarian ‘big-data’ are great – it can quite literally save lives²² – we shall focus here on its challenges, noting how they are compounded by the nature of humanitarian interventions and the contexts in which these interventions unfold.

One such challenge is that crisis maps record volatile situations and information that is by nature unstable and contested. Crisis maps involve any or all of three levels of data simultaneously.²³ First, there is the baseline data: the data that predates the crisis. As we have just seen with the ‘missing map’ section, this data is often inexistent and needs to be created mid-crisis. Second is the *situational data*, the data about what is happening *during* the crisis, which includes needs assessments, early warning systems and security data. This is what we often think of as ‘real-time’ data: the data that paints a picture of a situation, or the prime navigational data. Third and last is the response data, which is the data about the humanitarian work being done (or not), and is more evaluative in essence. This *evaluative data* relates to the performance of the organization itself and can include project monitoring, evaluation assessments, accountability documents, and audits.²⁴

²² While the author doesn’t embrace the same level of technological enthusiasm that is animating the field – see for instance Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarianism in the Network Age: Including World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2012* (United Nations, 2013) – the potential of humanitarian data ought to be recognized.

²³ For the accepted temporality of crisis – the pre, during and post, see Valérie November, *Risk, Disaster and Crisis Reduction: Mobilizing, Collecting and Sharing Information* (Cham: Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Springer, 2015), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebookbatch.SPRGR_batch:9783319085425.

²⁴ For more on situational and evaluative data, see Róisín Read, Bertrand Taithe, and Roger Mac Ginty, “Data Hubris? Humanitarian Information Systems and the Mirage of Technology,” *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 8 (August 2, 2016), 1319.

We could even add a fourth level to account for the projected or predictive data, which juxtaposes future scenarios and future risks to present assessments. The ability to overlay these multiple temporalities, while also useful in ‘regular’ live maps, is a particularly crucial feature of crisis mapping. However, as shall be discussed shortly, it runs the risk of conflating the meaning of needs and relief.

Another, more pragmatic challenge is the fact that the elements of interest to humanitarian mappers are often small in size, heterogeneous and inconsistent, lending themselves poorly to machine recognition and other processes of automation. While image feature extraction, analysis and classification are commonly used in natural disaster contexts (floods, earthquakes), in humanitarian settings (war, conflicts, displacement), the mapping scales are more demanding.²⁵ For instance, the movement of refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs) can only be partially automated. This means that humans cannot be completely removed from the equation – crisis maps must rely on technicians or volunteers to digitize, classify and conflate the crisis data.

As for the ethical challenges that we have come to expect from big data manipulation, they are taken to an extreme in the humanitarian context²⁶. To start, the majority of humanitarian data is by definition more dangerous to collect, and implies a transfer of risk to local data intermediaries who are placed in the heart of the violence to collect it. Indeed, crisis situations often foreclose the

²⁵ S. Voigt et al., “Towards Semi-Automated Satellite Mapping for Humanitarian Situational Awareness,” in *IEEE Global Humanitarian Technology Conference (GHTC 2014)*, 2014, 412–16.

²⁶ For a thorough overview of the challenges posed by humanitarian technology, see Sandvik et al., “Humanitarian Technology”; Kb Sandvik, Kl Jacobsen, and S. M. McDonald, “Do No Harm: A Taxonomy of the Challenges of Humanitarian Experimentation,” *International Review Of The Red Cross* 99, no. 904 (2017): 319–344.

possibility to rely on even the most rudimentary internet of things or mechanical sensors, turning instead towards vulnerable *human* sensors.

In addition to the physical bodies of the disaster victims and data collectors, risks are also lodged into the cloud. The International Committee of the Red Cross recently commissioned a study of the risks inherent to humanitarian metadata (data about other data),²⁷ relaying valid concerns over the digital trails that aid recipients and providers leave behind. Cash-transfer programs that use e-transfers or smart cards, population surveys intended for protection, mere communication exchanged between displaced/distant relatives, all run the risk of falling into the hands of third parties whose intent might be commercial activities, surveillance, or even repression.

Part of the problem is infrastructural and thus deeply material. As Lucy Bernholz and Lyndon Ormond-Parker remind us, data ethics begin with the ‘tech stack’:²⁸ the choice of computer storage, hardware, software, and all processes for storing, sharing and destroying data. There is no such thing as neutral digital infrastructure, since, “practically speaking, civil society, as a space free from government or commercial monitoring, doesn’t exist in networked digital space”.²⁹ To be sure, digital resources are constantly exchanged over “platforms and software that put third

²⁷ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Privacy International, “The Humanitarian Metadata Problem: ‘Doing No Harm’ in the Digital Era,” News release, October 2018, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/digital-trails-could-endanger-people-receiving-humanitarian-aid-icrc-and-privacy>.

²⁸ The ‘tech stack’, or technology stack, refers to the skeleton and underlying elements of a web or mobile application. These are the frameworks, languages, and software products that everything else is built on.

²⁹ Lucy Bernholz and Lyndon Ormond-Parker, “The Ethics of Designing Digital Infrastructure,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Stanford, Summer 2018, 36–37.

party interests between donors and recipients” – creating deep digital dependencies binding aid actors to government and commercial actors.³⁰

There are also deep privacy and ownership concerns in humanitarian data exchange. Humanitarian actors today are concerned about what to do with biometric data to track the movement of refugees and other displaced persons is: how should it be collected, where should it be stored? The question of whether the promise of receiving help justifies the breach of privacy remains hanging. We know also that data that has been scrubbed of *individual* identifiable information still poses risks of re-identification for vulnerable or persecuted communities once it has been processed and aggregated at the *group* level.³¹ Should that data still be processed and made available in the name of ‘meeting basic need’? At what costs? And what about the fact that many humanitarian projects are funded (at least partially) by governments? Must the data be ‘returned’ to them, or should it remain in the private (allegedly neutral) hands of humanitarian data scientists? To be sure, group data rights are lacking even in rich and peaceful cities,³² but for populations struggling for life and recognition to begin with, the quandary seems more acute.

There is a final point of ambiguity to be made about the meaning of data in humanitarian contexts. Indeed, the most enthusiastic of digital aid proponents characterize information as a need to be met

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ capacity4dev, *Sarah Telford from UN OCHA on the Challenge of Open Data in Humanitarian Response*, accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAYoAbQSEok>.

³² Gerard Jan Ritsema van Eck, “Algorithmic Mapmaking In ‘Smart Cities’: Data Protection Impact Assessments As A Means Of Protection For Groups,” in *Good Data*, ed. Angela Daly, S. Kate Devitt, and Monique Mann, Theory on Demand, #29 (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Institute of Network Cultures, 2019).

rather than a means to meet needs. To put it in the words of the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “instead of seeing it primarily as a tool for agencies to decide how to help people, *[information] must be understood as a product, or service, to help affected communities determine their own priorities.*”³³ The idea that information deserves to be elevated to the ranks of a universal and vital need (a right almost) betrays a real shift in how humanitarian responsibility is envisioned, and begs much deeper reflection.

5.3 Samaritans in the Cloud: Crowdsourcing and The Rise of Digital Volunteerism

The complex data assemblage to translate crisis *data* into crisis *maps* requires, at its heart, a swarm of digital volunteers who come together at times of crisis to process the information so scarcely acquired. In contrast to “traditional” relief workers, however, these volunteers generally operate remotely, far from the epicenter of crises, removed from the people directly affected by tragedy, in the cloud.

Touted by the techno-enthusiasts at the new “the new humanitarians,” digital volunteers are related to yet distinct from conventional relief organizations. They include employees of for-profit organizations, such as the social impact branches of private mobile telecommunication providers,

³³ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarianism in the Network Age: Including World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2012* (United Nations, 2013), 4.

or of high-tech firms (think Google.org, Google’s platform devoted to helping those “on the frontlines of global crises,” or Airbnb’s new refugee response program). They also include episodic, informal communities (such as people coming together for mapathons³⁴), or more established groups such as the members of the Digital Humanitarian Network, which coordinates various organizations of volunteers, and which sees itself as ‘network-of-networks’ providing an “interface between formal, professional humanitarian organizations and informal yet skilled-and-agile volunteer & technical networks.”³⁵

But they are not limited to technical communities alone. They can include everyone. In fact, you too could be a humanitarian worker, if only for a few clicks. If you logged into Tomnod.com³⁶ or Humanitarian Open Street Map’s Tasking Manager, you would be presented with satellite imagery of refugee settlements in Kenya, DRC or Bangladesh. You would be asked to identify whether the dots on the aerial photograph are shelters, plastic tents, or even mud huts (you would be identifying ‘geo-features’). In addition, you could be required to compare two images and derive what has changed in what you see (you would be deriving ‘temporal changes’). In the process, you could find yourself tracing the contours of what looks like a recent extension of an informal settlement of refugees, or the segment of the shore that seems to have been flooded, where the debris from

³⁴ For example <https://www.missingmaps.org/host/>

³⁵ “DHN | Leveraging Digital Networks for Humanitarian Response,” accessed June 11, 2019, <http://digitalhumanitarians.com/>.

³⁶ “Tomnod means “Big Eye” in Mongolian. It is also the name of a project owned by DigitalGlobe (now Maxar) that uses crowdsourcing (“the big eyes of everyone on the Tomnod team”) to explore satellite images and “discover important information about our planet.” See <https://www.tomnod.com/FAQ>.

the hurricane appear to have landed (you would be producing ‘shape files’). You might be asked to interpret if that United Nations warehouse was looted, or if this village was burned down by pro-government militias. From the comfort of your own workspace, in harmony with thousands of volunteers around the globe, you would be lending a hand to the recovery efforts. You would also be working with machines; in fact, in many instances, you would be training one.

For all its complexity and hybridity, digital volunteerism challenges the stability of the humanitarian field. It forces a reconceptualization of solidarity, participation and expertise in the humanitarian economy, and reveals a new form of labor in philanthropic markets. We now turn to some of its most salient features.

5.3.1 *The Compassionate Public – Then and Now*

Although the phenomenon gets presented as a novelty brought on by new technologies,³⁷ volunteerism actually harks back to a core nineteenth century humanitarian notion. Indeed, volunteers occupied an important place in the hagiographic narratives of the origins of organized humanitarian care, particularly that of the Red Cross. It is precisely the idea of forming “voluntary bands of compassionate workers” that would very give rise to Red Cross Societies (and eventually to the International Committee of the Red Cross) in the late nineteenth century. In Henri Dunant’s canonical testimony, “A memory of Solferino,” published in 1862 and heralded as the first modern

³⁷ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarianism in the Network Age: Including World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2012* (United Nations, 2013).

humanitarian manifesto, the Swiss businessman pleads for the formation of a corps of volunteers “to search for and nurse the wounded”:

“The personnel of the military hospitals is always insufficient; and, if it were doubled or tripled, it would still be insufficient. *We must call on the public, it is not possible, it never will be possible to avoid that.*

An appeal must be made, a petition presented to the men of all countries, of all classes, to the influential of this world, as well as to the most modest artisan, since all can, in one way or another, each in his own sphere, and according to his strength, cooperate in some measure in this good work.

This appeal is addressed to women as well as to men, to the queen, to the princess seated on the steps of the throne, as well as to the humble orphaned and charitable maid-servant or the poor widow alone in the world who desires to consecrate her last strength to the good of others.

It is addressed to the general, to the marshal, the Minister of War, as well as to the writer and the man of letters, who, by his publications, can plead with ability for the cause, thereby interesting all mankind, each nation, each country, each family even, since no one can say for certain that he is exempt from the danger of war.”³⁸

This reminder helps us better locate digital volunteerism, not as a twenty-first century novelty, but more as a puzzling resurgence of an erstwhile ideal, signaling yet a new turn in the construction of humanitarian legitimacy.³⁹

While volunteerism has endured in the humanitarian ethos (to this day, voluntary action remains one of the seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross), the professionalization trend that international aid agencies have pursued since early 1990s, had, if not eclipsed, then at least

³⁸ Henry Dunant, *A Memory of Solferino* (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, 1986), 86. Emphasis added.

³⁹ Shai Dromi reminds us that even in the nineteenth century the insistence on volunteerism as a social innovation was controversial. Policymakers of the day were indeed initially more inclined to improve military medical facilities than to support new volunteer societies. See Dromi, “Soldiers of the Cross,” 204.

marginalized, the amateur's role in relief operations⁴⁰. Now, in their hurried embrace of the digital, and oblivious to their own histories, humanitarian institutions cast the entry of digital volunteers as the advent of decentralization and greater democratization of the humanitarian polity:

“the world has seen not simply a technological shift [but] also a process of rapid decentralization of power ... Many new entrants are appearing in the field of emergency and disaster response. They are ignoring the traditional hierarchies because [they] perceive that there is something they can do which benefits others”⁴¹

The legitimizing turn itself is quite ambiguous (and, as we shall shortly see, paradoxical), as it crisscrosses the lines not only between professional humanitarians and the public, but also between the technical expert and the layperson. On one the hand, as we have just seen, the rise of the digital volunteerism implies a turn away from the expert (or perhaps more accurately, away from the institutions that define, train and elevate the expert). On the other hand, crisis mapping, and smart salvation more broadly, appeal to a whole new range of expertise, allowing the humanitarian organization a display of technical competency. Within the internal humanitarian hierarchy, computer scientists and specialized data experts are now gaining rank, given that the new tools “[empower] technical experts to overrule the decisions of their less informed superiors”.⁴² The humanitarian technician no longer plays a supporting role, but now appear to fully orchestrate the humanitarian response.

⁴⁰ When international aid came under scrutiny after the humanitarian blunders of Rwanda and Kosovo, organizations responded by orchestrating several important reforms, including transforming aid work into a full-fledged profession and training humanitarian professionals according to stricter standards. See the previous chapter for a more thorough discussion of the creation of standards and measures of competency.

⁴¹ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarianism in the Network Age: Including World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2012* (United Nations, 2013), 16.

⁴² OCHA, *Humanitarianism in the Network Age*, 2013), 4.

5.3.2 Crowd power 2.0

The digital volunteers are also praised for enlarging the humanitarian polity by forming new participatory communities. What is more, because the crowd is now augmented by the power of the machine, digital volunteers are seen as embodying an enhanced form of collective reasoning. This “collective intelligence in crisis,”⁴³ can be defined as the creation of hybrid networks linking local and global communities who develop social conventions, codes of conduct and technical measures to gather, verify and map crisis information.

Turning an anthropological eye to the phenomenon, and looking at this charitable action as a reciprocal gift exchange where both parties derive something from the relationship, one necessarily wonders about the nature of the exchange, and whether or not it is humanitarian in essence. In this formless intelligence, gift, voluntary participation and automation are hard to differentiate.

Recalling once again the Red Cross nineteenth century beginnings, it matters to remember that the social innovation then was to create an organization (an intelligence) that *paired affect with analysis and action*.⁴⁴ In other words, that the innovative nature of the Red Cross’ “compassionate workers” (Dunant’s original terms) was to channel overwhelming internal feelings that arise from

⁴³ Monika Büscher, Michael Liegl, and Vanessa Thomas, “Collective Intelligence in Crises,” in *Social Collective Intelligence: Combining the Powers of Humans and Machines to Build a Smarter Society*, ed. Daniele Miorandi et al., Computational Social Sciences (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2014), 243–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08681-1_12. Note that they locate the first use of collective intelligence in crisis at the Virginia Tech shootings of April 16, 2007.

⁴⁴ Matthew Newcomb, “From Tourist to Planner: Preparing for Affect in Henri Dunant’s A Memory of Solferino,” *Rhetoric Review* 34, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 445–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2015.1073562>.

war and disaster (and are difficult to define in language) *into operative work*. This is still true today for the communities of technologists who express their compassion through their digital labor and technical skills: time, expertise, proprietary technologies are exchanged in return for some intangible ‘symbolic capital,’ and a sense of duty and solidarity.⁴⁵ The game-like interfaces of the crisis imagery probably reignite some affective dimensions within the self, paradoxically proving that the humanitarian impulse (the elusive subjective feeling of compassion for the suffering of a distant human being) is alive and well.

The nature of the gift exchange is less clear when we look at the local crowds, those data providers standing in the middle of the war-torn city. In models like those of the social enterprise Ushahidi (which is Swahili for ‘testimony’⁴⁶), a pioneer in crowd mapping in times of strife, the people affected by the crisis, expecting assistance to be extended to them, are the same ones who are feeding the data. Can we speak of digital volunteerism then? Is *their* disaster data ever really volunteered or is it being extracted from them? When the victims become the witnesses, does it shift how aid actors respond? We will return to the blurring of lines between the helper and the helped in the final section of this chapter.

⁴⁵ For a more eloquent account of the neediness of the benefactor, see Liisa H. Malkki, *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁴⁶ “About Ushahidi,” Ushahidi, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://www.ushahidi.com/about>.

5.4 Algorithmic Relief: The Fabrication of Legitimacy in the Digital Age

Having gained a closer look into the making of crisis imagery and other geospatial visualizations, we now turn to a discussion on their different functions for humanitarian action. As Sheila Jasanoff explains, “the power of representations lies not so much in the resources invested in creating them (though these are not irrelevant) as in the resources used to disseminate them, so that they alter the behavior or command the belief of masses of sentient human actors”.⁴⁷

The point is not to deny crisis mapping its usefulness, but to shine on it a critical light. In the following two sections, we discuss what crisis mapping does and means for humanitarian neutrality and humanitarian spatiality. We understand these implications as being deeply ambiguous: both stabilizing and challenging a professional and political field whose legitimacy is constantly contested.

5.4.1 *Neutrality in the Age of Smart Salvation*

The main proposition is that in the era of smart salvation, humanitarian neutrality resides in the technological. That is, it resides in the algorithmic triangulation and validation of data from a variety of sources and constituents, including vast networks of digital volunteers. The crisis map embeds several socio-technical ideals, which are detailed below.

⁴⁷ Sheila Jasanoff, “Ordering Knowledge, Ordering Society,” 25.

First is the aura of scientism, empirical truth and representational accuracy which is maintained in any map.⁴⁸ The authoritative scientific view of the map is presented as an objective way to order chaos. Because it is built out of an aggregate of *facts*, as opposed to the *narratives* usually woven into humanitarian situation reports (‘sitreps’ in humanitarian lingo), the crisis map is seen as more objective, and thus more neutral. The calculating power of crisis maps enhances humanitarian actors’ credibility, redirecting the discussion away from the subjective, the empathetic and the interpretive, towards more quantifiable, tractable, concerns of efficiency and cause-to-effect reasoning. It provides the sought-after evidence for justifying decision-making, and for satisfying those who wish to rationalize aid expenses.⁴⁹ This is nothing new. As historian Bertrand Taithe reminds us, the launch of nineteenth century institutionalized humanitarian action also relied on “statistical data representing the scale of the task and the enormity of the needs, and doing so better than sentimental appeals to compassion.”⁵⁰

Second, compounding the ‘traditional’ scientific objectivity of the map, is the technologically deterministic idea that computation and automation are passive and thus neutral. In the digitized crisis map, the black box of the algorithm,⁵¹ together with the supposed neutrality of the digital infrastructure and electronic channels of data communication, which allegedly flattens questions

⁴⁸ See Camilo Arturo Leslie, “Territoriality, Map-Mindedness, and the Politics of Place,” *Theory and Society: Dordrecht* 45, no. 2 (April 2016): 172, and many before him.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 3 on cost-benefit analysis.

⁵⁰ Read, et al., “Data Hubris?”, 1317.

⁵¹ Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

of hierarchy,⁵² are all seen as fundamentally devoid of human subjectivity. As such, they cancel, or in the very least reduce, human interference.

Third, the crisis map blurs the distinction between image and insight. “The (location) map is the new operating system” says the tech executive at MAXAR (formerly Digital Globe) – a global firm specializing in satellite imagery and geospatial intelligence.⁵³ The crisis map takes on the allure of a control panel, where legibility and management become one and the same.⁵⁴ With the crisis map, it is as if the automated processing of precise geo-located and timestamped data could cut through the political and ethical conundrums – leap over Lindblom’s “muddling-through” – and induce an ethical-because-precise response.

A fourth socio-technical ideal has to do with dispersion, scale, or rather bigness (as in *big-data*’s bigness) and autoregulation. It is the idea that having a diversity of actors and techniques that allegedly self-regulate *neutralizes* impure motives. The ‘good’ whole neutralizes the (potentially compromised) parts, so to speak. This version of a neutrality obtained through accounting reminds us of “carbon neutrality”, which is similarly obtained by balancing carbon emissions with carbon removal or offsetting: it is a mathematical neutrality.

⁵² Bernholz and Ormond-Parker, “The Ethics of Designing Digital Infrastructure.”

⁵³ Shay Har-Noy, “Big Data, Heavy Data and Location Data Is the New Database,” Kratos Constellations Podcast, accessed May 26, 2019, <http://info.kratoscomms.com/acton/form/26439/001f:d-0001/0/-/-/-/-/index.htm>.

⁵⁴ Here I am drawing on Antoine Picon’s discussion of the cybernetic aura that envelops the smart city, as well as on Bruno Latour’s concept of centers of calculation. See [Antoine Picon, *Smart cities*, \(2013\), 31-40.](#)

A final feature is the fictional synchronicity that gets established between need and relief. The simultaneity that exist in crisis maps embodies the illusion (or ideal) of seamless correspondence between event and response, which is what humanitarians have always dreamed of achieving. Here, the spatialized visualization that the crisis map offers surpasses what Calhoun has termed the “emergency imaginary”– the idea that urgency and immediacy are defining features of humanitarianism, setting humanitarianism apart from charity or development⁵⁵. If war reporting and new media technologies bolstered humanitarian action in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries by making possible a “new immediacy of awareness of distant event and suffering,”⁵⁶ today’s crisis map makes possible (in appearance at least) a whole new level of synchronicity between the expression of needs and the deployment of relief. Indeed, the crisis map outperforms the “kit” as a moral-technical ideal because it promises to reduce to zero the time that separates crisis from action.

5.4.2 *Off the Map*

While the promises of smart salvation are undeniable, much falls off the crisis map. The following quote summarizes the implicit factors that lurk beneath its sophisticated interface:

“The rhetorical persuasiveness [of crisis maps] is greatest among people least familiar with the means through which they were produced (...) The discursive choices that

⁵⁵ For Calhoun, the emergency is more than a distinguishing characteristic, it is also a new “basic unit of global affairs” which allows for the erasure of the causes of the catastrophe or disaster, as well as fills in the void left by a loss of faith in economic development and political struggle as cures or preventative measures. See Craig Calhoun, “The Idea of Emergency: Humanitarian Action and Global (Dis)Order,” in *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, by Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (New York: Zone Books ; Cambridge, Mass, 2010), 29–58. Interestingly, Calhoun notes a conflation between place and emergency, “Darfur’ is as much the name of an emergency as the name of a place,” writes Calhoun.

⁵⁶ Calhoun, 30-31. See also Davide Rodogno,

the visualization of data takes are clearly encoded in a less familiar way than other forms of humanitarian rhetoric but they are no less dramatically rhetorical (...) the visualization of data answers to its own aesthetic and ethical norms which, cumulated over time, have become a set of devices which would require careful analysis to become explicit.”⁵⁷

For one, while all can agree on the drastic contraction of time needed for crisis information to circulate today, the ideal of immediacy collides with the reality of crisis response. Despite the best of intentions, responses remain messy. Priority setting takes time, and redressing the misalignments between the different parties involved – civil society, local populations, government actors, funders – is tedious,⁵⁸ especially when it comes to disbursing aid funding, which needs to be resolved *before* anything else can start. The ‘muddling through’ of recovery happens both off and on the map, as Katrina Petersen explains in her description of the mapping of Californian wildfires:

“The interplay between different technological and human entities to produce each map in turn produced different spaces of disaster in ways that challenged priorities of disaster preparedness and response. Specifically, the different mapping practices ... produced different relationship to temporality, boundaries and responsibility, making different aspects of the disaster visible while construction different threats and definition of dangers. They juxtaposed representational and relation knowledge as well as the value of prevention and demonstration.”⁵⁹

The normalization efforts that underpin the crisis map are never neutral. Neither are the classification aimed at differentiating the deserving victims from the non-deserving others, which

⁵⁷ Read, et al., “Data Hubris?,” 1323.

⁵⁸ Michael Hooper, “Priority Setting amid the Rubble: Organisational Approaches to Post-Disaster Reconstruction in Haiti,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 10, Part A (December 2014): 270–80.

⁵⁹ Katrina Petersen, “Producing Space, Tracing Authority: Mapping the 2007 San Diego Wildfires,” *The Sociological Review* 62, no. 1_suppl (2014): 91–113.

is deeply political. Humanitarian status changes according to the categorization of threats and changing political or economic regimes; think only of Afghan citizens who have known decades of hardship, and a litany of labels: in a single lifetime, they might have been called citizens, refugees, internally displaced persons and sometimes insurgents, oscillating between status of deserving victims to that of undeserving poor.⁶⁰

As for the predictive models embedded in many crisis maps, while clearly beneficial in many cases, they alone do not ensure that crises will be avoided. Awareness and prevention requires levels of societal and cultural mobilization that are often well beyond the reach of humanitarian actors. The scientific models, which permit predictions, simulations and the testing of potential solutions, not only broaden the constitutive vision of humanitarian institutions, they also participate in creating the fiction that humanitarians can truly control risks.

5.5 The (Rhetorical) Return of Place

So far, we have seen how technology enthusiasts treat the location map as a humanitarian operating system, more than a mere computational tool. The concept of location has also taken a more consequential meaning in international aid practice and literature. There too, location has recently been elevated from the ranks of a mere feature or attribute, to the rank of an organizing principle.

⁶⁰ Joël Glasman, “Seeing Like a Refugee Agency: A Short History of UNHCR Classifications in Central Africa (1961–2015),” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 337–62, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/few044>.

It is precisely this elevation that I want to address when speaking of “the return of place” in new forms of humanitarian (spatial) intelligence, both computational and organizational.

As we recall from earlier chapters, humanitarian space has long been considered immaterial and placeless, treated first and foremost as a legal concept. While this has resulted in a poor understanding of humanitarian spatiality *in general*, it has not entirely foreclosed reflections on the tensions and paradoxes inherent to the study of “place” in humanitarian contexts. We can briefly recall anthropological work on moments of *dis*-placements (vs. moments of *em*-placements) and notions of *non*-places (“*non lieux*”)⁶¹ – lines of enquiry centered mostly on questions of identity formation for refugees and other displaced persons.

Here, we want to understand what the role of place is in contemporary humanitarianism, not primarily in relation to the political subject, although this is important too, but in relation to spatial *planning* practices.

5.5.1 Localization and the ‘area-based’ approach

An obvious starting point is the current “localization” trend that has taken hold of the aid agenda, as illustrated by the UN secretary general’s plea, at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, to make

⁶¹ The important problem of “place” within discussions of humanitarian spatiality has been taken up by several anthropologists, including Liisa Malkki’s observation on moments of *dis*-placement and moments of *em*-placements (Agier, 130), as well as Arjun Appadurai’s larger commentary on locality. Michel Agier has brought Marc Augé’s notion of non-places (*non lieux*) – defined as the “anthropological places” or spaces of transience where human beings remain anonymous and that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as “places” – to bear on situations of forced migration and refugee settlement. This line of enquiry generally serves to illuminate anthropological questions, particularly questions of identity formation for the displaced.

humanitarian aid “as local as possible, as international as necessary.”⁶² The call for localization is not only rhetorical. Following the Summit, donors committed to allocating 25% of their funding through local and national responders within two years.⁶³ The new buzzword appears to be the latest concoction of common development ingredients – empowerment, participation, democratization, decentralization – only this time, taking spatial organization seriously.

The Overseas Development Institute, a global think tank devoted to matters of international development and bridging research and professional practice, associates localization with “the need to recognize, respect, strengthen, rebalance, recalibrate, reinforce or return some type of ownership or place to local and national actors (...), reflecting the belief that at least part of the problem [of humanitarian action] stems from the humanitarian system’s exclusion of local actors.”⁶⁴

The idea – which sounds desperately obvious to any environmentally minded professional (and to any scholar of architecture and urbanism) – is to target a specific geographical area and start from there to address whichever development problem needs addressing; and do so in a way that is holistic and integrative of multiple socio-economic sectors.⁶⁵ A synonym for localization, equally

⁶² United Nations (2016) One humanity: shared responsibility. World Humanitarian Summit Report, 01376 A/70 (February), 3–4

⁶³ Alexander Betts and Kate Pincock and Evan Easton-Calabria, “Research in Brief: Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance” RSC Research in Brief 10 (December 12, 2018).

⁶⁴ See Veronique Barbelet, “As Local as Possible, as International as Necessary: Understanding Capacity and Complementarity in Humanitarian Action,” ODI, n.d., 5. See also (Wall and Hedlund, 2016; De Geoffroy et al., 2017; Featherstone, 2017; Humanitarian Advisory Group et al., 2017)

⁶⁵ Jan Harfst, “A Practitioner’s Guide to Area-Based Development Programming,” UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe & CIS, December 2006, 9. The following formulation is particularly revealing: “*Area*’ and *Problem*’ are

popular in humanitarian circles today, is the term ‘area-based approach’, or ‘area-based development.’ Why the method is not simply called spatial planning (or urban development) is bewildering.⁶⁶

The unwieldy formulation holds the cue: the fact that development is considered to have become “*area-based*” reveals that it is no longer ‘*sector-based*’ and ‘*target group-based*’. The ‘area’ or the ‘local’ have replaced these other two organizing principles, i.e. the economic sector (such as education or health), and the categorizations of persons (whose status orients the intervention: i.e. refugees, women, youth, etc.). It is not just a question of semantics, it is a profound rescaling of the conventional unit of international development interventions, which has always been the State. There is a consciousness that a spatial approach “should not be regarded as a ‘practice area’ in the same way as, for example, ‘environment’ or ‘governance’, but rather an approach or methodology or a ‘way of organizing projects’.”⁶⁷

It would appear that, finally, space and geography have become entry points for making sense of and planning responses to a complex problem, whether it concerns conflict, disaster, climate, poverty or exclusion. Spatial intelligence is thus an integral part of a new type of humanitarian

linked in a sense that the problem to be addressed by the project or programme defines its geographical area of intervention and is therefore area-specific compared to the country at large”.

⁶⁶ The neologism of “area-based approaches” is symptomatic of the disconnected modes of knowledge production that humanitarian actors adopt in their “auxiliary space”, which Lisa Smirl discusses, and which were reviewed in Chapter 2. Here it could be an ignorance of, or a reluctance to employ, the methods and theories of planning and urbanism. Either way, it is part of what Lisa Smirl calls “the spectacle of development as constructed from within the humanitarian enclave.” See [Smirl, “Spaces of Aid,” 206.](#)

⁶⁷ Harfst, “A Practitioner’s Guide”, 13.

intelligence, which recognizes “the necessity of looking back (using historical analyses), looking around (using geographically sensitive lenses attentive to scale and space, and by acknowledging the significance of Southern led responses), and (...) questioning the locus of one’s gaze).”⁶⁸

5.5.2 *Localization as Democratization*

There is another strong parallel to be drawn between geo-location technologies and localization discourses: both equate localization with democratization.

In other words, the claim shared by both the aid agencies and the crisis mappers is that localization brings about the representation of wider publics, since “accessing new data sources may require listening to people who may previously have been ignored.”⁶⁹

In the localization imaginary, the shift of resources from international to local actors, is touted as an inversion of hierarchies, and a reinforcement of local capacities, whereby affected populations automatically become responders and decision-makers.⁷⁰ In the crisis mapper’s imaginary, that very empowerment is measured in numbers of tweets, rates of mobile phone subscribers or usage

It also implies policies that shift resources from international to local actors, inverting hierarchies, and reinforcing rather than replacing local capacities⁶⁸. Of course, the new buzzword is a recent concoction of old ingredients central to the development discourse (empowerment, participation, democratization, decentralization), only this time, spatial organization is taken seriously. ⁶⁸ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “Looking Forward: Disasters at 40,” *Disasters* 43, no. S1 (2019): S36–60.

⁶⁹ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarianism in the Network Age: Including World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2012* (United Nations, 2013), 4.

⁷⁰ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “Contextualising the Localisation of Aid Agenda,” *Refugee Hosts* (blog), January 22, 2018, <https://refugeehosts.org/blog/contextualising-the-localisation-of-aid-agenda/>.

statistics of digital humanitarian platforms – place-based indicators that all become proxies for democratic participation.

Admittedly local agency in responding to crisis and supporting recovery is real and deserves to be seen and shown a lot more than it currently is. Empowerment, as elusive a notion as it is, should continue to be a key consideration in humanitarian endeavors. That being said, we must recall, as Jasanoff tells us, that “pleas for justice and public acknowledgment are at best imperfectly represented in even the most robust of data sets.”⁷¹ What is more, geo-localized data does not automatically capture the essence of the ‘place’.

First, and perhaps least worrisome, the notion of ‘local’ is often laden with epistemological biases, born of specific North-centric/Western-centric cultural and social conceptions of power, of what ‘recovery’ ought to resemble, and of who its agents should be.⁷² It isn’t clear what, where, who and when is the ‘local’ in this new idiom. The term refers interchangeably to different scales: from the regional or the national (non-West), to the municipal or the neighborhood. As Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh puts it,

“In practice, the ‘localization of aid agenda’ often equates ‘the local’ with actors situated within and representing a specific geopolitical *region* (ie. a regional organization such as the Arab League), actors operating at the *national* level (i.e. host

⁷¹ [Sheila Jasanoff, “Virtual, Visible, and Actionable: Data Assemblages and the Sightlines of Justice,” *Big Data & Society* 4, no. 2 \(December 1, 2017\): 12.](#)

⁷² I agree with those who propose that the localization should be a call to humanitarians to examine their own identity and radically alter their perception of the local. See Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, *ibid*, as well as Janaka Jayawickrama and Bushra Rehman, “Before Defining What Is Local, Let’s Build the Capacities of Humanitarian Agencies,” *Refugee Hosts* (blog), April 10, 2018.

states such as Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey) and/or on the *sub-national* level (including municipal authorities).”⁷³

It reminds us of the concept of the field discussed in the last chapter. Here again, history would be useful for periodizing moments of centralization, decentralization and delegation in humanitarian decision-making and knowledge production.⁷⁴

Furthermore, the blurring of lines between who provides and receives humanitarian aid (between the sensor, the witness and the agent) should give us pause. The flow of data and resources alone isn't enough to level the unequal power relations between those who give and those who receive. Are there not risks that Smart Salvation might transfer the burden of proof to the victims and allow those responsible to eschew their responsibilities? Geo-localized data might be mathematically precise, but how much does it really convey about the suffering, loss of dignity and dispossession occurring in place, at ground level? In other words, how much does it convey about local knowledge, and what are the risks in confusing the two?

5.6 Conclusion

Going-back to our crisis-maps, let us close with a few questions. Despite the recrudescence of the local and the localized, does smart salvation signify a spatial turn within aid (something akin to the ‘material turn’ discussed in chapter 4)? Or is rather another, intensified technological turn?

⁷³ Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “Contextualising the Localisation of Aid Agenda.”

⁷⁴ See again Read, et al., “Data Hubris?” p.1316-17; decision-making was initially delegated to the local level, and it is only in the past 20 years that it ceased to be so. See duties of the Red Cross delegate in International Review of the Red Cross, 1975.

Arguably, crisis maps are good at representing those who are often forgotten in ‘regular’ maps, but do they have the capacity to produce better humanitarian decisions, plans, projects and places?

Can crisis mapping instruments lead to good cities? Is it enough for a city to be efficient, coordinated and legible to be ‘good’? Like the smart city’s live maps, the crisis map represents the urban realm as informal, chaotic, and in a continuous state of crisis. While it proposes a management of dispersion that seems well suited to the present condition, it fails to resolve tensions between decentralization and democratization.

Might it be that smart salvation is better at strengthening humanitarians than it is at producing space? It would appear that crisis mapping is more about creating communities of helpers (in which data becomes *the gift*, the means of exchange) than it is about making the ‘beneficiaries’ into legible entities that can be localized, and thus counted, and thus controlled. In short, it is more about Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities than about James C. Scott’s high-modernist legibility. Certainly, there is a panoptical dimension to the crisis map, but pragmatically, for now at least, its real effect seems to lie in the (re)constitution and representation of a vast global public of compassionate volunteers – experts and amateurs of all creeds – coming together around a common (dare we say universal) goal. It is about showing a formless community holding together through “loyalties of the imagination”⁷⁵.

⁷⁵ See Sheila Jasanoff’s discussion of Anderson in Jasanoff, “Ordering Knowledge, Ordering Society,” 25–26. The instrumentalities of standardization that were discussed in Chapter 3 (the Sphere standards, and cluster coordination mechanisms) were more about legibility.

Similar to the smart city, in which the mechanics of learning and reasoning are intrinsic to the city itself, and for which the map is proof of the city's intelligence,⁷⁶ the crisis map provides humanitarians with the evidence of their own spatialized intelligence.

From the perspective of innovation bluntly construed, it seems that for once, humanitarians might not trail behind but rather be in the lead of data science and practice. It could very well be that the experts working on “fixing” humanitarian data –making it safer, more accurate, more ethical, more integrative of past-present-future– are actually doing pioneering work. Should this be true, the expression “appropriate technology” would get flipped on its head: no longer meaning suitable (in the sense of low-tech) but rather opportune and good.

⁷⁶ Picon, *Smart cities*, 8, 110. “La carte permet à l’intelligence spatialisée de la ville de se représenter à elle-même.”

Chapter 6 Conclusion

The Case for Humanitarian Urbanism (and for a material approach to the study of humanitarianism)

6.1 Institutional amnesia

On 19 December 2018, UN agencies, international humanitarian NGOs, city mayors and local government representatives from around the globe met at the Palais des Nations in Geneva to discuss the problem of urban refugees and forced displacement in/to cities. The two-day meeting was being convened by the current High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, and was intended, in the agency's words, for "*different segments of society* to showcase their unique contributions to *comprehensive refugee responses in urban settings*."¹ Incidentally, the meeting was benefiting from a certain momentum, opening only a day after the UN General assembly had affirmed the Global Compact on Refugees², a symbolic gesture by the international community to signify its commitment to tackling the refugee crisis through more cooperative and holistic solutions.

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, 2018," UNHCR, accessed August 23, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/high-commissioners-dialogue-on-protection-challenges-2018.html>.

² Adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 17, 2018, the Global Compact on Refugees is a non-binding international UN agreement "for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing, recognizing that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without international cooperation. It provides a blueprint for governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders to ensure that host communities get the support they need and that refugees can lead productive lives." While it builds on existing international law and standards, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and human rights treaties, it does not constitute a law in itself. It has symbolic and utilitarian value.

In his closing remarks, the High Commissioner applauded his municipal counterparts: the meeting had provided resounding proofs that a comprehensive, multifaceted and integrative view of urban systems should *become* fundamental to humanitarian practices. It had also divulged the affinities that existed between humanitarian actors and municipalities (as well as other urban civil society groups) engaged in refugee response. As Grandi saw it, both were similarly “at the sharp end of the stick, where refugee protection is made real.”³ Seeming at once hopeful at the prospects of this novel partnership, and confounded by why it had taken so long for his agency and cities to come together, he joked: ‘Where had they (the municipalities) been all this time?’⁴

One might be better served by turning the question around, and ask instead: where had *the international humanitarian community* been all this time? Almost fifty years had passed since UNHCR’s hesitant participation in the Habitat Settlement conference, and listening to the High Commissioner’s speech in Geneva, it seemed as though humanitarian institutions were discovering the centrality of the urban problem for the first time.

This lapse in memory, (and the supposedly ‘newfound’ interest in the urban) is not surprising. It has been echoed throughout the humanitarian field over the past ten years, through practitioners and academics’ urgent calls to find solutions to this “new” challenge. The reasons behind what we

³ High Commissioner 11th Dialogue on Protection Challenges, closing remarks by Filippo Grandi, 19 December 2018. Palais des Nation, Geneva. <https://youtu.be/2jCmhiLVw4U>

⁴ To be clear, many of the participants, although happy to be acknowledged and eager to cooperate, felt that it was about time that the UN recognized their predicament. (Participant observation)

could call a professional amnesia are precisely what this dissertation sought to address, and where it hopes to be most useful. This dissertation has proceeded to do the following. First it has offered a new framework for conceiving of humanitarian spatial practices – one that goes beyond a binary between camps and cities, whereby humanitarian action is defined in opposition to planning. Instead, it has proposed to look at different approaches to urban expertise and urban knowledges, through the prism of humanitarian urbanism, which it defined as the sum of processes of spatial development that emerge from humanitarian action, at various scales and sites, through different strategies, involving institutional arrangements, political strategies, spatial ideologies, power relationships and expertise that are specific to humanitarian action. The hope is that this new lens might offer contribution to three domains of thought: 1) history; 2) urban theory; and 3) the materially inclined social sciences.

6.2 A New light on humanitarian history

Choosing to take a longer view, and adopting a new interpretative lens (humanitarian urbanism), to study humanitarian approaches to spatiality has allowed us to unearth forgotten episodes in humanitarian urban history and history of the humanitarian present. The choice to bookend this dissertation's temporal frame by the Habitat episode on one end, and the Smart Salvation imaginary of humanitarian crisis mapping on the other, is deliberate. These two episodes correspond to two moments when urbanization takes central stage in discussions of international aid, and reflect intense convergence between humanitarian and urbanistic problems. The first locates the initial articulation of an explicit position on the urban question in the mid-1970s, when the humanitarian field came to realize the important linkages between spatial policy and its

mandate to safeguard the lives and dignity of victims of conflict and disasters. The second analyzes the present, when the urban scale and the idea of spatial intelligence have once again, albeit in different ways, taken hold of humanitarian operations and discourse. The dissertation puts these two moments in relation with one another to demonstrate that shared concerns have imbricated humanitarian response and broader urbanization processes for much longer than is conventionally believed. We have located important points of convergence around issues of socio-spatial integration as a path to development, around the importance and meaning of ‘home’ for human flourishing, or around public participation and the collective appropriation of shared spaces.

What happened between these two moments, what I termed in Chapter 4 “the apogee of standards” is explained as yet another type of spatial epistemology. While it shows the power that rationalization and standardization discourses have had over humanitarian spatial practices in the wake of the cold war and the onset of globalization, (which might also explain the lingering resistance to fully embrace urbanism as a mode of intervention), it nonetheless debunks the myth that rationalization and standardization are the only *modus operandi* of humanitarian spatial planning.

From this historical setup, one can start posing new questions: What caused the field to forego its role shaping the built environment in the transition from Habitat to the apogee of standards? What prompted the return of some extent of spatial concerns in the last ten years? What do the sensibilities to changing spatial and environmental representations and discourses tell us about the humanitarian field more broadly? Looking at this richer and more complex history of humanitarian urbanism, what new possibilities for humanitarian place-making and humanitarian planning might

we imagine for the future? More fundamentally, and perhaps more bluntly, can humanitarianism (as a field) ever really sustain the types of urban of engagement it claims to want to embrace today, without first having to fundamentally alter its core values, and relinquish the imaginary that favors kits and rigid standards?

6.3 Urban theory and normativity beyond the state

Beyond humanitarian history, this dissertation also contributes to advancing urban planning theory. The introduction explained why the relationship between global humanitarian action and urbanism was fraught, and why that might have impeded a better understanding of the phenomenon thus far. We saw that from the angle of practice, the logics that traditionally define humanitarianism have seemed intrinsically incompatible with those of urbanism. From the theoretical angle, the complex temporalities, geographies, politics, cosmopolitanisms of humanitarian spatiality have defied mainstream epistemic categories of urban theory. Indeed, the notion that *humanitarian urbanism* might be a contradiction in terms has been one the central epistemic puzzle of this dissertation.

Humanitarian urbanism, posited as new interpretative lens, offers a more coherent understanding of this uniquely theory-defiant, ‘atomized’ humanitarian spatiality (contemporary, but also past). It builds on and furthers the agenda set by several critical urban theorists who call for a more reflexive type of urban theory and a profound rethinking of inherited approaches to urban research, principally work that frames the urban as “a site, medium and outcome of historically specific

relations of social power” continuously under contestation and malleable to reconfiguration.⁵ Indeed, humanitarian urbanism can only begin to cohere with the support of the conceptual scaffolds that theories of uneven development, splintered sovereignties and planning without development are currently constructing.⁶ Benefiting from this scholarship – it participates in redirecting the attention to questions of power, inequality, justice, at once within and among cities. Because it looks at atomized, disintegrated, and dispersed urban processes, ones that are still in part governed by the kit culture and a project mentality, humanitarian urbanism also approximates other scholarship interested in event-based urbanity.⁷

Finally, humanitarianism furthers the aforementioned scholarship through a double focus on non-state planning agents and on normativity. Indeed, rather than being a contradiction in terms, *humanitarian urbanism* evokes a normative ‘redoubling’ of sorts, combining the utopian, reformist tendencies of urbanists and urban scholars with humanitarian ideals. It offers a thorough view into normative ideals that private, non-state actors – such as large international aid organizations – can disseminate when they plan cities.

⁵ Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, “Towards a New Epistemology of the Urban?,” *City* 19, no. 2–3 (May 4, 2015): 151–82.

⁶ Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, 3rd ed (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Diane E. Davis, “Non-State Armed Actors, New Imagined Communities, and Shifting Patterns of Sovereignty and Insecurity in the Modern World,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 2 (August 1, 2009): 221–45; Hiba Bou Akar, *For the War yet to Come: Planning Beirut’s Frontiers* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2018).

⁷ Antoine Picon, *Smart Cities: A Spatialised Intelligence*, AD Primers (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley, 2015).

6.4 The Case for A Material Approach to The Study of Humanitarianism

A third, broader, area of contribution includes social science methods and material approaches to social studies. To assess the spatial practices of international humanitarian actors, the methodological convention within urbanism would have been to select a specific site (or a geography) as the unit of analysis. As with any discipline that uses the built environment as an entry point into social inquiry, the custom would have been to evaluate how a *place* or a *spatial formation*, ranging from a neighborhood to an entire region, either reflected certain intentions or created certain social formations. Instead, this dissertation has focused on the instruments, knowledges and practices with which international humanitarian organizations approach questions of physical and environmental interventions, building on STS concepts and methods.

This dissertation has argued for a socio-technical imaginary approach, an approach chosen, in part, for its ability to synthesize a large amount of scattered data, and analyze multidirectional, dynamic relationships. Admittedly, the dual focus on the small scale (the instrument), and the very large scale (the field, the institution) embraced in this research leaves a lot of territory uncovered, and might sometimes fail to accord enough importance to other critical explanatory factors. Nevertheless, it has begun to unearth the important role of scientific and technological authority in the construction of the humanitarian gesture, a role that is still misunderstood in scholarship, policy and in professional practice. As such, it has provided an analytical blueprint for future studies of other humanitarian techniques and technical assemblages, which are bound to multiply in the years to come.

The socio-technical imaginary approach has shown a somewhat paradoxical trend within humanitarian action. At the same time as humanitarian actors confronts the hard, concrete materiality of cities, they are also entering a deeply digital era, and are having to rely more and more on complex forms of computational intelligence, and less and less on visible and tangible infrastructures.⁸ Chapter 5 covered, for instance, some of the controversies that surround the use of humanitarian database, assistance provisions through digital cash transfers, constitutions of networks of volunteers who lend a helping hand from the comfort of their living and game rooms. By attending to questions of materiality, expertise, and legitimacy, an STS approach to the study and theory of humanitarianism has highlighted the interplay between moral and scientific rationality that needs to be better understood as the humanitarian field moves into this new era.

Drawing on STS, this dissertation has found that spatial expertise plays a crucial yet paradoxical role in aid agencies' quest for political legitimacy and moral accountability. On one hand, spatial expertise has been marginalized as inferior to political or legal ones – it has been seen as diluting the purity of the humanitarian ideal, as explained in Chapter 4. On the other hand, there has been a desire that spatial “fixes” solve even the thorniest of humanitarian dilemmas, as explained in both Chapters 4 and 5. What emerges from an examination of the various socio-technical imaginaries of aid is the fact that both technological and repertoires work towards the display, stabilization and extension of some key humanitarian principles. In short, how impartiality, neutrality and independence get constructed is historically contingent – sometime it occurs in opposition to technical and scientific authority, sometime in close association with it.

⁸ The paradox is similar the one Picon describes for the smart city. See Picon, *Smart Cities* (2015).

Finally, the STS orientation taken by this dissertation contributes to a larger discussion about the constitutional position of technology in the humanitarian order. In part, it has the potential to go beyond the language of ‘unintended consequences’, a terminology that takes benevolence for granted, and assumes that any negative effect stemming from technology is an accident. In that regard, humanitarian technology currently appears to enjoy a double immunity of sort: it is immune from scrutiny into its inner workings a) because it is technocratic and thus assumed to be value-free, and b) because, as a humanitarian endeavor, it is assumed unequivocally benevolent. I am not suggesting that we ought to vilify humanitarian aid – not at all. I am merely suggesting new avenues for research that might lead to new depths into how humanitarians understand themselves and their legitimacy. The language of “solutions,” to take another example, permeates humanitarian institutions (particularly though not exclusively their assistance departments), and as such, reveals a lot about how humanitarian organizations think about what their effect on the world should be. Material and STS approaches can raise the following questions: How do science and technology contribute to the (real or perceived) solidity of humanitarian constructs? How do the potent myths of value-free and self-regulating science converge with humanitarian validation, trustworthiness, and credibility? How does humanitarianism exploit, resist and accommodate technological change? Both scholarship on modern humanitarian action, and our contemporary world, would be well served by providing more light on such fundamental questions.

Illustrations

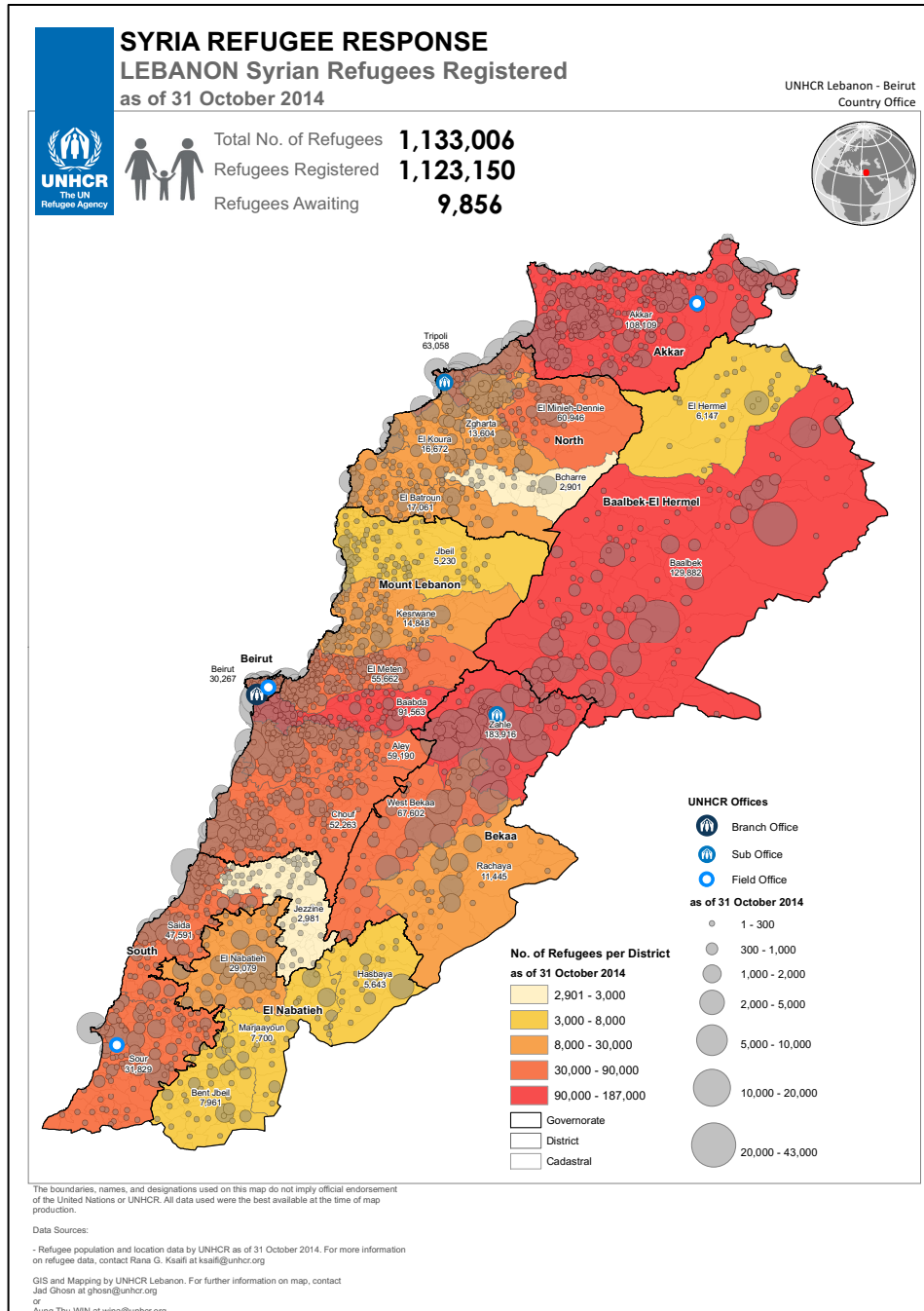


Figure 4 - Heat map of registered Syrian Refugee as of October 31, 2014.

Source: Syrian Refugee Response Interagency Information Sharing Portal (UNHCR). Accessed November 2014.

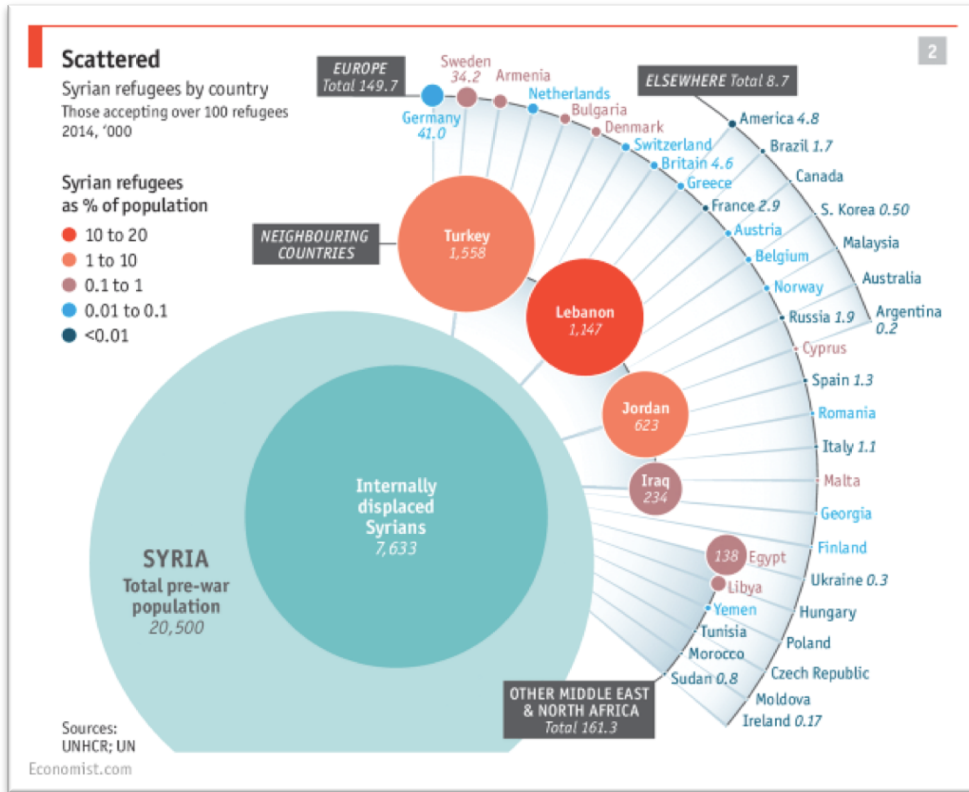


Figure 5 - "Where Syrians Find Their Refuge."
 Source: The Economist, September 10, 2015



Figure 6 - "The Flight of Refugee Around the World".

Source: The New York Times, June 20, 2015

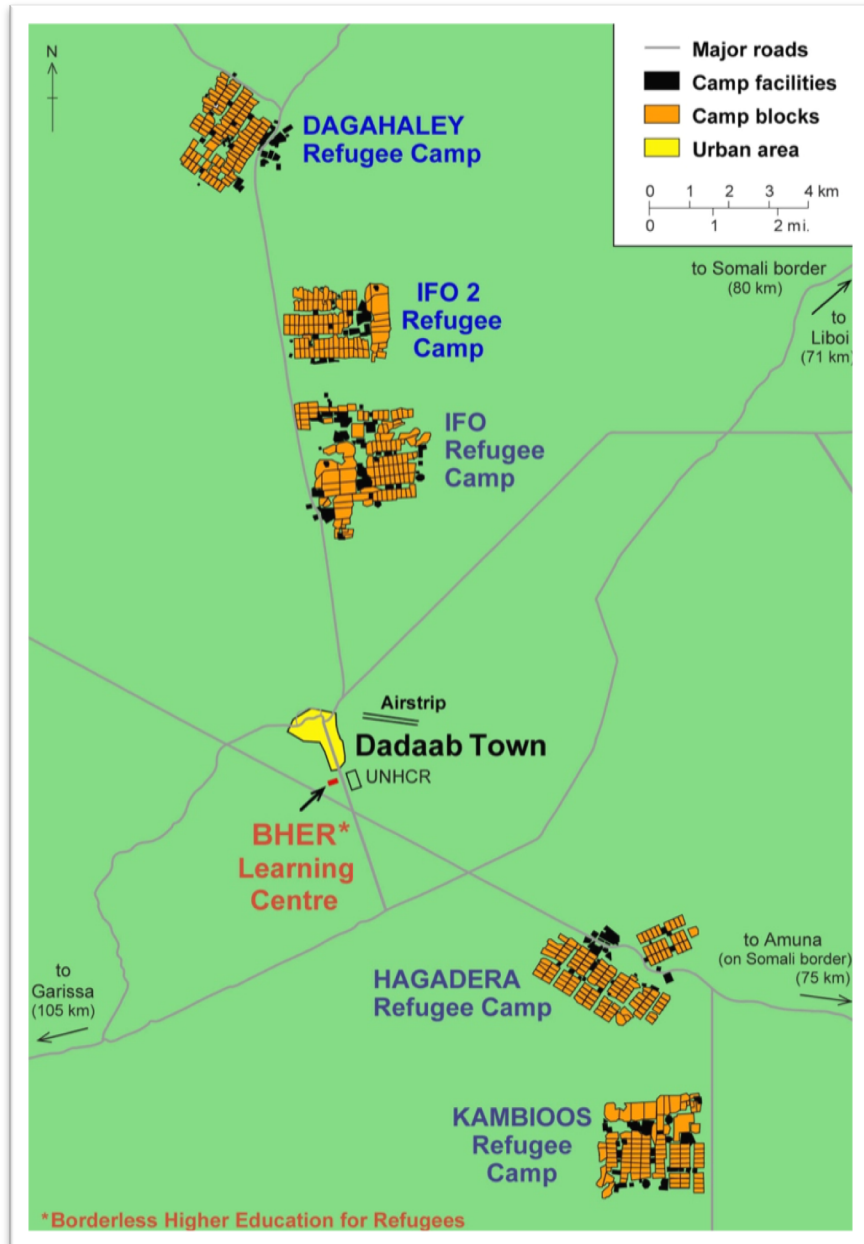


Figure 7 - The Dadaab Refugee Camps Garissa County, Kenya Cartographic Office,
 Source: BHER Learning Centre York University, 2012 and Joseph Mensah. (Excerpt from Herz, 2013)

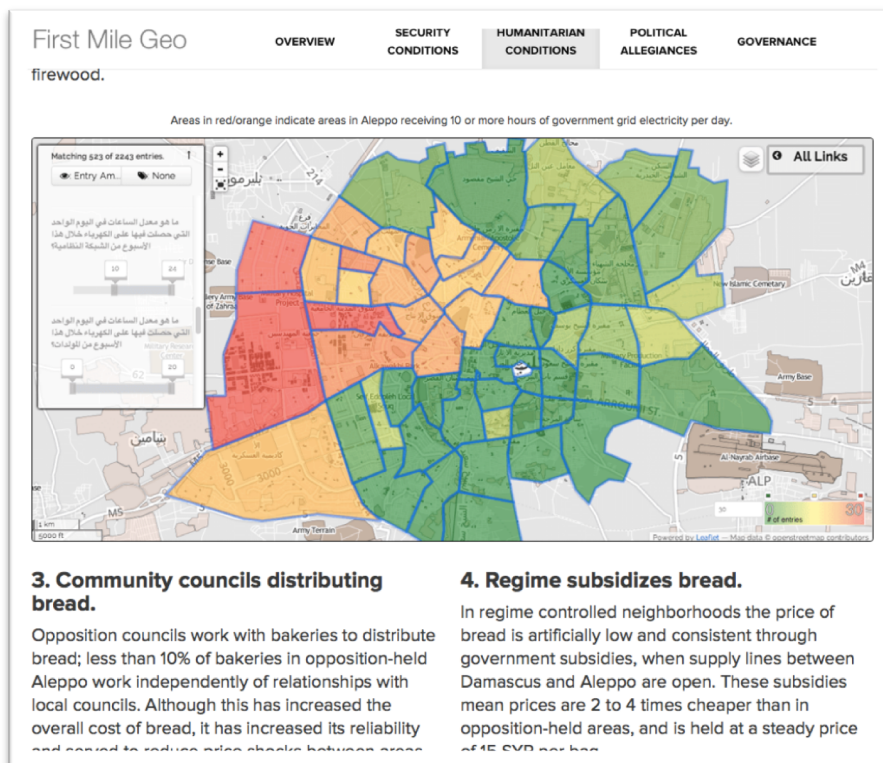


Figure 8 - Geospatial analytics of humanitarian conditions in Aleppo (2013).

Source: First Mile Geo

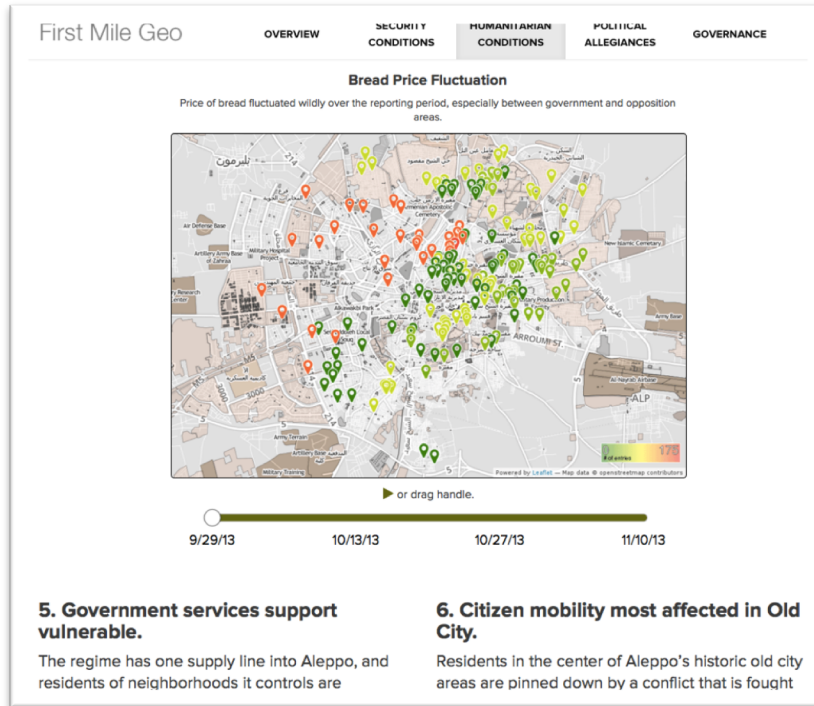


Figure 9 - Geospatial analytics of humanitarian conditions in Aleppo (2013).

Source: First Mile Geo



ICRC

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF
THE RED CROSS

WHO WE ARE

WHAT WE DO

WHERE WE WORK

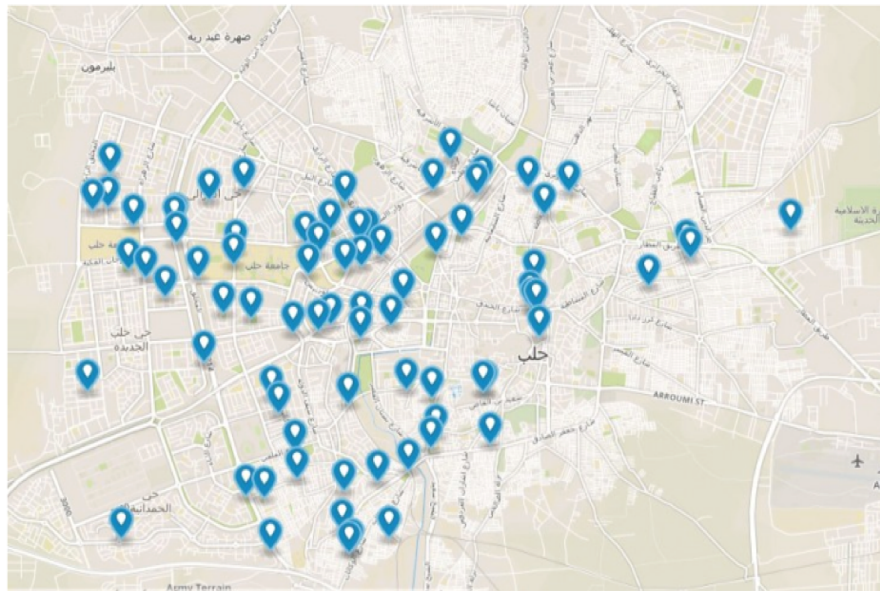
WAR & LAW

SUPPORT US

Syria: ICRC works to avoid massive water crisis in Aleppo

Article | 10 NOVEMBER 2015

As water cuts in Aleppo reach an all-time high, the ICRC and its local partner organizations are asking for help in publicizing a GPS-enabled map that gives users the ability to pinpoint themselves in relation to a network of restored water wells throughout the city.



A screenshot of the alternative water network in Aleppo – created by the ICRC in partnership with local Syrian partners

Figure 10 - Map of "Alternative Water Network"

Source: ICRC <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-icrc-water-crisis-aleppo>

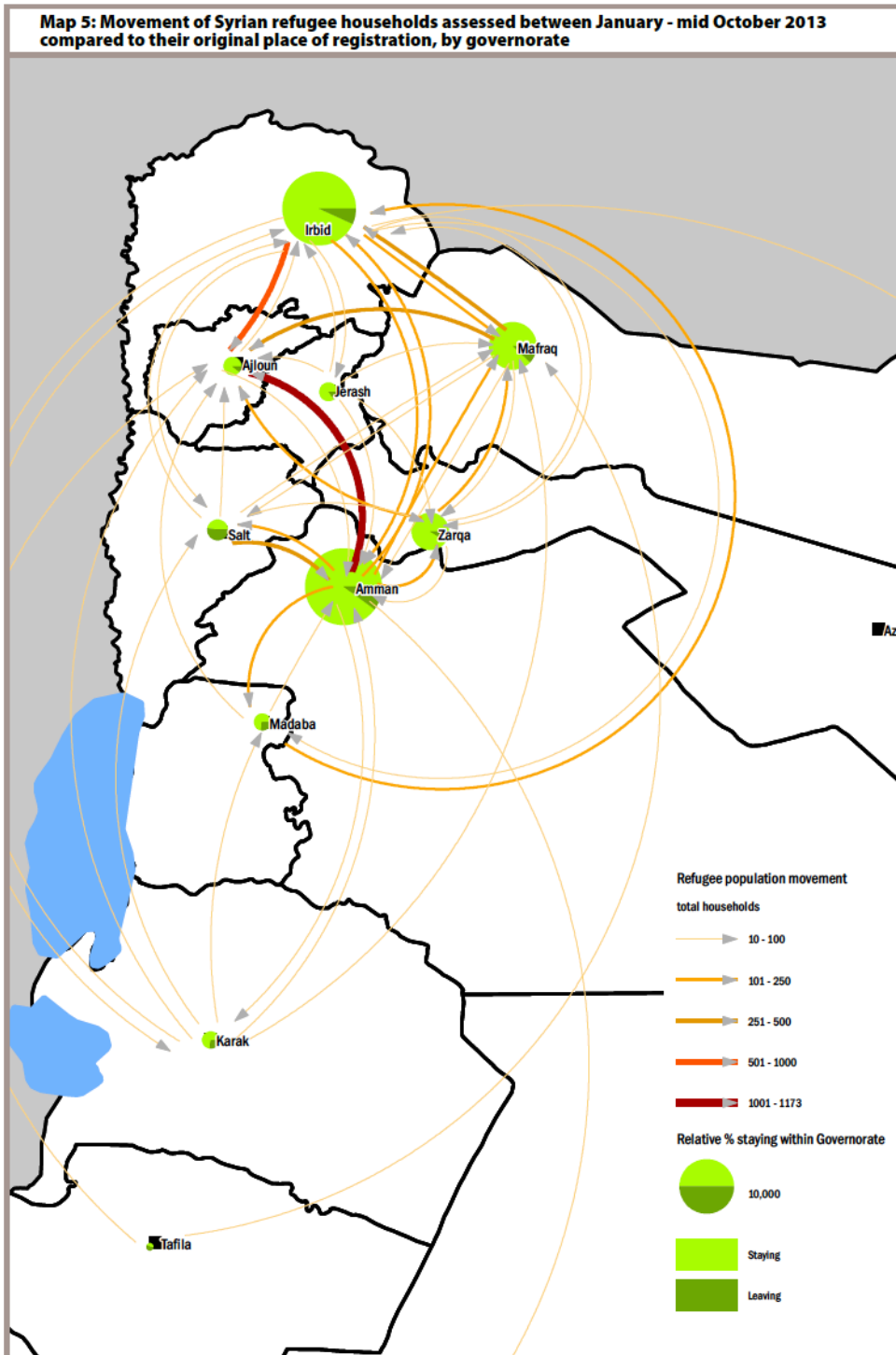


Figure 11 - Secondary and Tertiary Movements of Syrian Refugee Households.

Source: UNHCR Jordan Operation. "Syrian Refugees Living Outside Camps in Jordan - Home Visit Data Findings, 2013." Amman, Jordan, 2013.

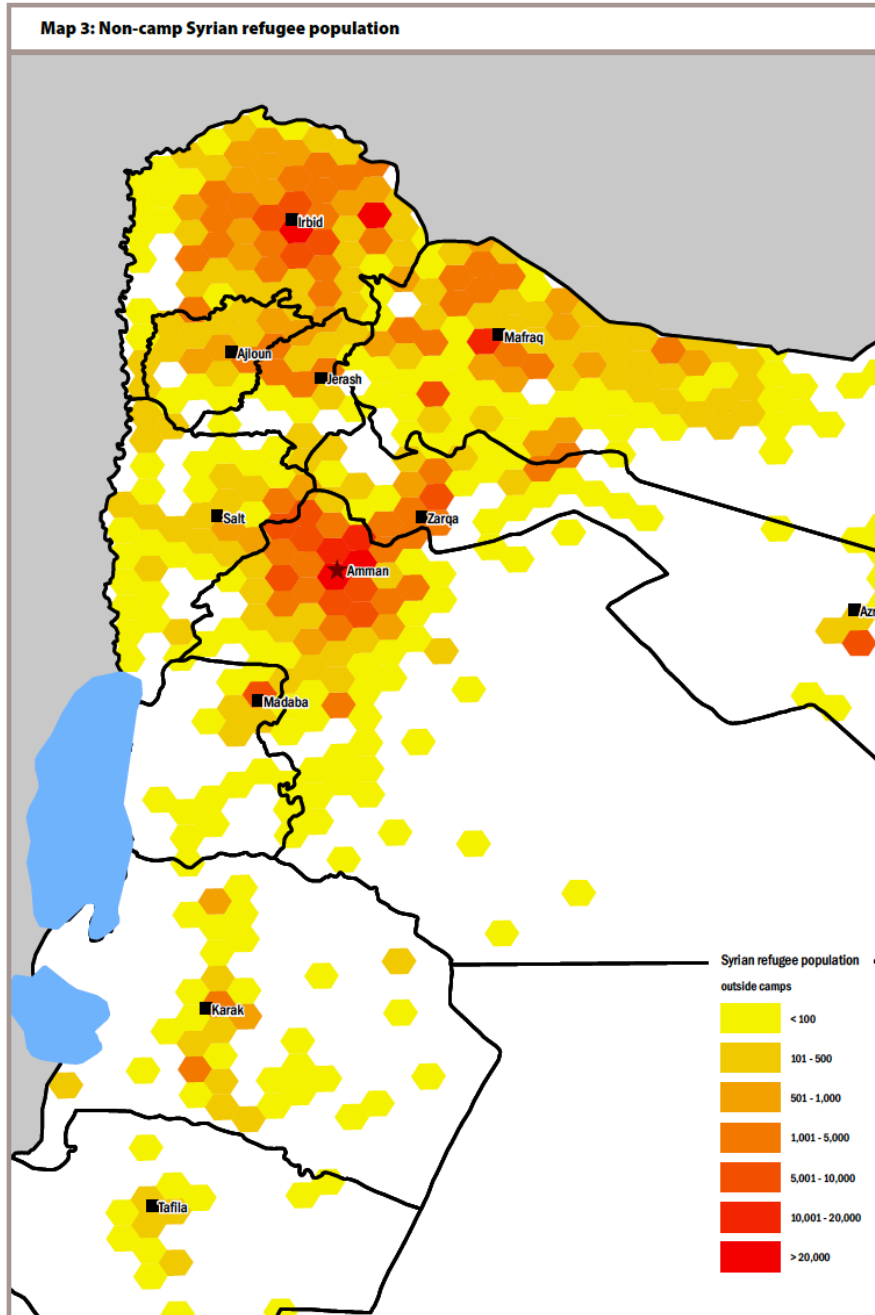


Figure 12 - Syrian Refugee Households Living Out-of-Camp.

Source: UNHCR Jordan Operation. "Syrian Refugees Living Outside Camps in Jordan - Home Visit Data Findings, 2013." Amman, Jordan, 2013.

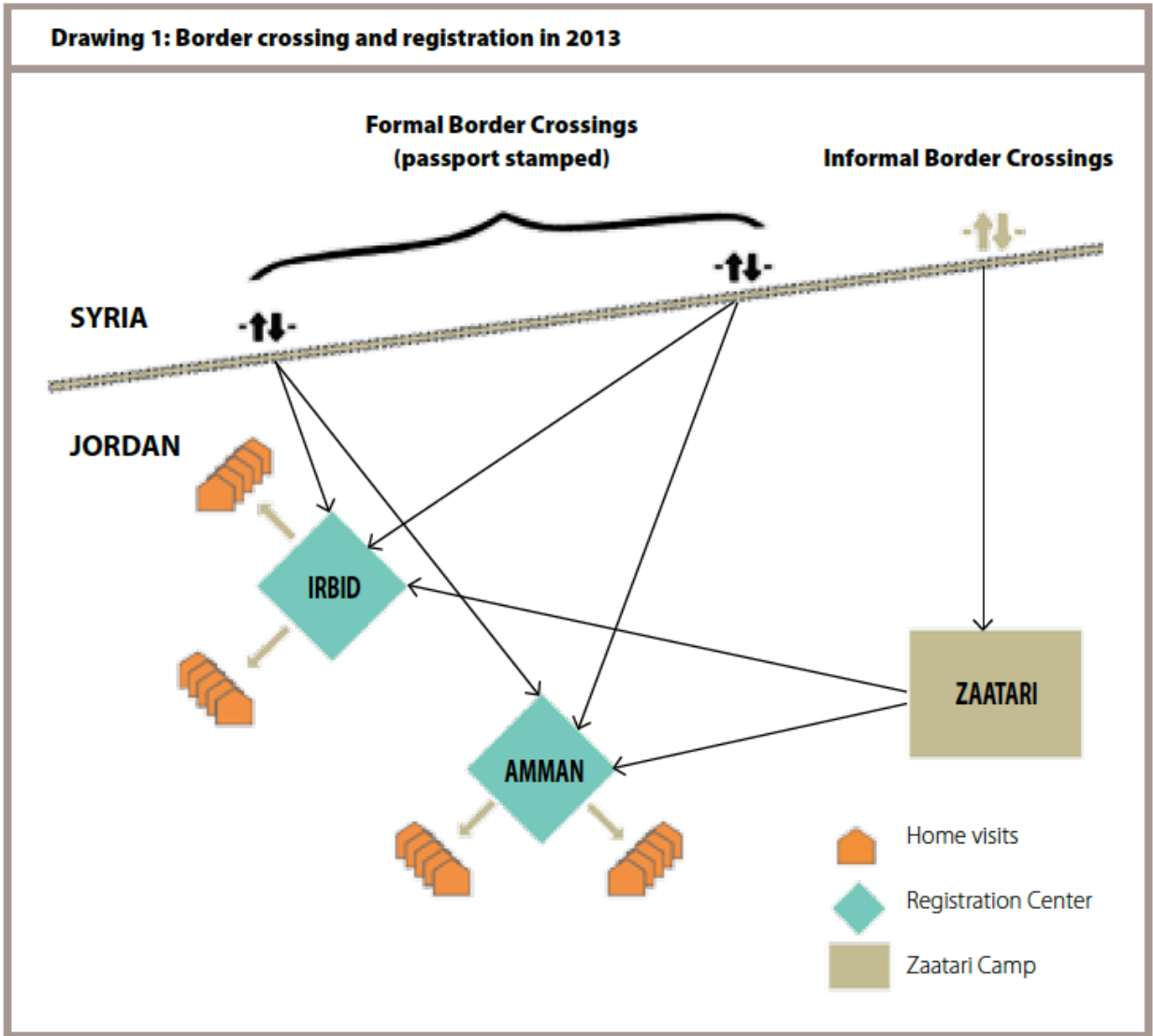


Figure 13 - Secondary and Tertiary Movements of Syrian Refugee Households.

Source: UNHCR Jordan Operation. "Syrian Refugees Living Outside Camps in Jordan - Home Visit Data Findings, 2013." Amman, Jordan, 2013.

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