

Why Covid-19 should not be considered as solely a humanitarian emergency

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Should the health, social and political blast represented by the current pandemic lead humanitarian workers to break free from the principle of neutrality? In this article, the author gives a clearly affirmative answer to this question. Anna Khakee believes that humanitarian NGOs must take a stance so as not to be exploited by only helping to return to the *status quo ante*.

People are dying, facing hunger and becoming destitute as a result of Covid-19. The lockdown of societies around the world was initially a humanitarian decision made with a view to saving lives. Yet, it is argued here that humanitarians should be wary of treating the situation as mainly, or even essentially, a humanitarian emergency. A purely humanitarian public health response to the crisis is today actively and forcefully resisted in the Global North. There are loudly voiced concerns about the social, ethnic and economic inequalities and the imbalance between human and natural habitats underlying the crisis, and calls for a radical overhaul – rather than tweaking – of dominant structures. There is no reason why this debate should not be at least as vibrant in and around the Global South. However, to date, although Southern voices are certainly there, this fundamentally political debate has yet to reverberate more strongly across the North-South divide. Humanitarian actors will play a crucial role here, as they can either help or hinder the discussion. In the current political climate and given their powerful role in shaping the discourse on North-South relations, they should be aware that any humanitarian response which is primarily technical and public health-oriented (and thus purportedly apolitical) in actual fact has strong political connotations. In other words, neutrality in humanitarian action – never an uncomplicated path to follow – is treacherous territory in today's (post-) Covid-19 world.

Humanitarianism expanding across the Global North

Humanitarian actors have been shouldering an expanding role during and in the aftermath of Covid-19. In traditional donor countries, humanitarians have been acting where they usually would not. In Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and other European countries, *Médecins Sans Frontières* have been supporting overwhelmed hospitals and health systems. The Red Cross and Red Crescent have been key in providing Covid-19-related healthcare to at-risk communities in settings where they have not previously worked, such as migrants under special quarantine in centres in Malta. Tackling the indirect economic consequences of the

health crisis on people experiencing hardship has become one of the added roles of humanitarians across Europe. From irregular migrant workers in Geneva, Switzerland, to university students from vulnerable backgrounds in Lille, France, humanitarian organisations are now distributing basic necessities to new groups of people and in some of the richest countries on earth. This state of affairs is unlikely to subside anytime soon. A few months into an economic crisis that many predict will last for several years, people who are already poor and marginalised from Klaipėda to Naples, Alaska to Florida are finding it increasingly difficult to put food on the table each day¹.

The humanitarian consequences of Covid-19 in the Global South

However distressing, it goes without saying that all this is merely a faint whisper in comparison to the impact of Covid-19 in the materially poorest countries in the world. The death figures are daunting. According to statistics, Yemen reported the highest death rate of 22.7% of confirmed cases as of 5 June 2020, reflecting low levels of testing but more importantly the major implosion of the national healthcare system². At the time of writing, Brazil was facing a public health disaster about to spiral out of control. Death tolls are underestimated almost everywhere, but more so in the Global South, where access to healthcare is more precarious and diagnostic and reporting mechanisms less well funded and implemented. The chasms in public health provision are plain to see: most African countries have few ventilators – or not a single one in some States, limited oxygen reserves, and, more basically, a lack of clean water and soap³. The indirect effects of the Covid-19 crisis are equally horrifying: sectors based on export or externally-oriented industries such as textiles, along with certain types of manufacturing and tourism have been all but wiped out. From the Maasai in Kenya, reliant on safari tourism, to female garment workers in Bangladeshi factories geared to provide apparel to retailers in affluent countries, the lives of many people working in such industries have been shattered. Locally sourced incomes have not necessarily fared better – witness the millions of Indians employed in local manufacture, small businesses and as household helpers now taking to the road to trek back to their home villages, at times more than a thousand kilometres away from the metropolises where they were striving for a better life a few short months ago. People who were looking to take advantage of upward mobility in the world's cities are now hoping to find food for the day. Hunger is looming not only in the poorest countries but also in middle income countries.

¹ Lauren Bauer, "The COVID-19 crisis has already left too many children hungry in America", *Brookings Institution*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/05/06/the-covid-19-crisis-has-already-left-too-many-children-hungry-in-america> and Zosia Wanat "Coronavirus will increase number in EU at risk of going hungry, experts warn", *Politico*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-could-double-number-of-europeans-at-risk-of-going-hungry-experts-warn>

² Johns Hopkins Corona Virus Resource Center, "Mortality Analysis", <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality> Accessed on 5 June 2020.

³ Ruth Maclean and Simon Marks, "10 African Countries Have No Ventilators. That's Only Part of the Problem", *The New York Times*, 18 April, updated 17 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/world/africa/africa-coronavirus-ventilators.html>

The contested humanitarian lens in the Global North

There is no doubt that humanitarians must step in to save lives and confer some sort of dignity to such people in dire need, and this is also being done, often with admirable courage. But seeing this as a question of just saving “bare life”, to borrow Giorgio Agamben’s expression, would be a tragedy in and of itself. Viewing this disaster through the prism of humanitarianism misses some of its key dimensions, its crucial causes and implications.

This argument has already been forcefully made in the Global North. There is an intense political discussion in northern States on how to interpret and frame this crisis and what conclusions to draw from it. The essence of this debate has been to pull interpretations away from the purely medical, epidemiological, humanitarian and lockdown-related aspects. The questions raised touch the fundamental ways that our societies, our economies and our relationship to nature are organised: is Covid-19 fundamentally an environmental crisis, a manifestation of the unnatural links between humans and animal species or of human encroachment on wildlife habitats that led to the crisis? Is the unequal death toll – and in particular the over-representation of the socially disadvantaged and ethnic minorities – the result of entrenched structural inequities in the richest parts of the world? Are the strained, and in many cases overwhelmed, European and North American public healthcare systems proof of the failure of dominant neoliberal economic models, with their primacy put on efficiency and just-in-time restocking, and with a web of supply chains stretching around the world? Is it right that “key workers” are often among the least well remunerated? Are government responses that focus on businesses appropriate and just, when such businesses provide generous dividends to their shareholders and lavish lifestyles to their managers but do not have the three to four months’ worth of savings expected from an ordinary worker to stay afloat and keep their entire workforce intact? Should we instead, like Spain, be moving towards a basic universal income? In essence, how should we respond and what should the post-Covid world look like? Julie Billaud has argued that the Global North must avoid a humanitarian reading of the Covid-19 crisis. For her, the imposition of a state of emergency and the emphasis on biomedical measures are proof that Western governments prefer to interpret the crisis as a mere “humanitarian” or “technical”, rather than political, matter. This view encourages not only an obfuscation of the issues raised above but also the taking of deeply political decisions in the name of expertise throughout the Global North⁴.

The debate in and around the Global South

The political arguments which Billaud feared would not be had in the North are, as we are seeing, thankfully being made, although the battle of ideas is far from being won by any one side. The contention here is that this debate is equally urgent in and around the Global South, although it has been largely stifled to date. It is important that such a debate is not, as

⁴ Julie Billaud, “Coronavirus: Less Humanitarianism, More Politics!”, *Allegra Lab*, 25 March 2020, <https://allegralaboratory.net/coronavirus-less-humanitarianism-more-politics-corona>

tends to be the case, drowned out by the complexity of immediate human distress and want, or by the usual calls for more aid and debt forgiveness, however useful. In fact, one of the few initiatives bridging the North-South divide so far has been in favour of debt relief. This idea has been championed amongst others by a global initiative of parliamentarians who called for “extensive debt forgiveness” in a letter to the heads of the IMF and the World Bank⁵. Similarly, humanitarians have appealed against a drop in aid levels⁶. However, what is missing in such appeals are the more fundamental issues. Debts are crippling some poor countries, yes, humanitarian funding levels are at risk, yes, but the need for debt forgiveness and humanitarian aid are only manifestations of deeper political and economic problems.

Essentially, the questions posed in the Global South are not entirely dissimilar from those posed in the Global North. They pertain to economic inequalities, ethnicity, and structures of racism – in the case of the Global South across States as well as internally within them. They also include the inadequacy of social security and safety nets, the state of public healthcare and the fulfilment of social and economic rights writ large within the context of the current global economic system. Overarching all this is the looming threat of environmental collapse and destruction. Such questions have indeed been raised across the Global South. Thus, a joint appeal by a number of African thinkers pointed at African middle and upper classes’ lack of consideration for the dire economic, sanitary and health situation of their poorest fellow citizens. They stressed that the Covid-19 crisis is a moment for deeper reform – more narrowly of the health sector, and more broadly of national political systems and development models, looking for collaborative solutions for the African continent⁷.

Such concerns have found echo in some of the initial reports and pronouncements of international institutions and campaigning NGOs. Thus, for instance, UN Assistant Secretary-General Kanni Wignaraja has called for “bolder ideas” to tackle the effects of Covid-19 on the poorest, including a basic universal income⁸. In a joint analysis of the consequences of Covid-19 on child labour, the ILO and UNICEF emphasised social protection, labour market reform, international human and labour rights, and justice as key responses⁹. Others have focused on demanding wholesale rethinking of specific global industries, such as the garment industry, in order to move in a more equitable direction¹⁰. Many of the main global agencies

⁵ “Intl Delegation Letter to IFIs on Debt Forgiveness for IDA Countries”, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/download/ifi-letter?id=D3601AD9-E5CB-4E1E-9FC3-7F1936C70706&download=1&inline=file>

⁶ Raphael Gorgeu, “The world tomorrow: COVID-19 and the new humanitarian”, *Humanitarian Law and Policy Blog*, 20 May 2020, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2020/05/20/the-world-tomorrow-covid-19-new-humanitarian>

⁷ « Aux dirigeants du continent africain : face au Covid-19, il est temps d’agir ! » *Mediapart*, 13 avril 2020, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/les-invites-de-mediapart/blog/130420/aux-dirigeants-du-continent-africain-face-au-covid-19-il-est-temps-dagir>

⁸ Kanni Wignaraja, “The need for universal basic income”, UNDP blog, 6 May 2020, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2020/the-need-for-universal-basic-income.html>

⁹ ILO and UNICEF, “COVID-19 and child labour: A time of crisis, a time to act”, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19-and-Child-Labour-publication.pdf>

¹⁰ Meg Lewis, “Opinion: The fashion industry must learn from coronavirus”, *Thomson Reuters Foundation News*, 24 April 2020, <https://news.trust.org/item/20200424064703-2ftug>

working on renewable energy and resource management have urged governments to invest in renewable energy to kick-start economic growth post-Covid-19¹¹. There are also appeals from other quarters for a thorough transformation of global agri-food systems, including localisation of production and more government intervention. So far, however, such calls have appeared more in the specialised press and not reverberated in the public debate to the same extent as the calls for change inside the Global North.

Political humanitarianism is not where you think

In tackling Covid-19, war metaphors have abounded, and presidents and prime ministers have posed themselves as generals and commanders-in-chief. However, this is obviously not an armed conflict. Thus, governments cannot, as they sometimes do, reasonably claim that humanitarians are siding with the enemy: the enemy is a virus. So the utilitarian argument for neutrality – used to convince recalcitrant armed actors to grant humanitarians access – falls to the wayside. Neutrality as a philosophical stance – not engaging in controversies of a political nature because humanitarianism looks to reach over and beyond them – is, in the Covid-19 case, impossible to adopt. This is because a purely technical, medical and epidemiological stance is, as we have seen, one of the most political of stances in the current circumstances. It encourages a certain set of international responses, which do not question structural inequalities and the ways of the pre-Covid-19 world, in order to gain dominance. Given the moral authority of humanitarian organisations, their silence and emphasis on the technical and short-term risks legitimise the *status quo ante* as something to strive for and return to. Their voices are much needed in a debate that to date has been too timid across the North-South divide.

People in the Global North have been so consumed by the repercussions of Covid-19 in their own little world that what is happening further afield has receded even further than usual into the background. As a consequence, there is even less pressure than in normal times for governments, international organisations and non-governmental actors to act in the longer-term interest of the peoples of the Global South. This fact, too, means that the voice of humanitarian organisations will be more important than ever in the future. Discussions on broader changes in agricultural systems, trade relations, public health provision, guaranteeing a basic income for the poorest, managing the natural world, etc. will quite possibly not be had without their participation. As noted by Didier Fassin, “All over the world people want to not just go back to their normal life... but beyond that, to live a different life, to have another model of society, which would not be based only on individualism, the search for profit, and the exploitation of the planet, but solidarity, social justice, and the protection of the environment”¹². Ultimately, if humanitarians settle for

¹¹ Jillian Ambrose, “Green energy could drive Covid-19 recovery with \$100tn boost”, *The Guardian*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/20/green-energy-could-drive-covid-19-recovery-international-renewable-energy-agency>

¹² Didier Fassin, interviewed by Joanne Lipman, “An Unprecedented Health Crisis: Didier Fassin on the Global Response to the Covid Pandemic”, *Institute for Advanced Study*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.ias.edu/ideas/fassin-covid-global-response>

making it possible for people in the Global South to go back to their normal life, they become a conservative and no longer a progressive force in today's world.

Biography • Anna Khakee

She joined the Department of International Relations at the University of Malta in 2011. She has served as its Network on Humanitarian Action (NOHA) Director since 2014. Prior to her appointment, she worked as a Senior Researcher at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva, Switzerland and for several years as a consultant to think tanks and international organisations, including the Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre (FRIDE), the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). She holds a PhD in Political Science and International Relations from IHEID. She has published widely, including in the *Journal of North African Studies*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* and *East European Politics and Societies*.

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