Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs

Minimal Humanity

Joël Glasman

Conclusion

Infrastructure of commensurability

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"In this innovative and grounded study, Joël Glasman reveals how it came to be that the smallest unit of our shared humanity—its least common denominator—is neither you nor me, but the calorie, the liter of water, the metrics of our need in our moments of deepest distress. This fascinating work deserves wide readership and demands deep reflection."

— *Gregory Mann, author of From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: the Road to Nongovernmentality (2015)*

"Combining a provocative perspective with a meticulous eye for detail, Joël Glasman's insightful history traces humanitarian efforts to define human suffering through an index of vital needs. Minimal Humanity reminds us of the fundamental complexity of apparently simple matters."

— *Peter Redfield, author of Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders (2013)*

"This is a fascinating historical study of how and why humanitarian organizations quantified basic human needs over the course of the 20th century. Glasman (Univ. of Bayreuth, Germany) provides an engaging intellectual genealogy of the transition from subjective approaches to evaluating suffering to relying on allegedly objective and universal measurements. Using methods such as measuring the left arms of children for malnutrition allowed humanitarian organizations to claim they avoided politicizing assistance. However, organizations frequently debated how needs should be defined, as Glasman describes in detail with the *Sphere Handbook*, a humanitarian needs manual published in the 1990s. Just as humanitarian organizations claimed to be serving a generic humanity not defined by culture or politics, aid personnel also promoted an idea of consensus between the global North and South regarding needs. The author convincingly argues that this aspirational ideal of a common, measurable set of needs actually obscures the financial and political inequities between North and South, using Cameroon as a case study of the political and economic realities of how needs are measured in a humanitarian crisis. Specialists in humanitarianism should definitely read this book."

— *J. M. Rich, Marywood University, Choice Review, Highly Recommended, November 2020 Vol. 58 No. 3*

"In his insightful and wonderfully jargon-free book, *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs*, Joël Glasman delves into the history of what he calls the "bookkeeping of human suffering on a world scale (...) Glasman's book is much richer than can be described here. It is highly recommended for scholars of refugees, humanitarianism, data, and the production of knowledge. Given his extremely readable writing style, the book can also be recommended to those engaged in the humanitarian field who may not have the time or patience to slog through other academic critiques of their work."

— *Brett Shadle, African Studies Review*

Conclusion

Infrastructure of commensurability

The aim of this book was to historicize practices of quantification that are now at the core of humanitarian government. A historical perspective allows us to look beyond the current hype around "humanitarian data." It also allows us to take a nuanced look at critiques of relief aid. While the apologists for big numbers idealize the robustness of "humanitarian data" and expect too much from them, critics often miss the fact that statistics are not solely an ideological superstructure or "hubris," and often do have real effects (even if these effects are rarely those expected by the quantification's apologists). Humanitarian quantification, as I hope to have shown, is neither a panacea nor a mere fiction. It is an integral part of the humanitarian government and plays a key role in the running of the whole engine. Practices of quantification are not merely ideological. They have their own logic, materiality, and effects – whether one believes in their usefulness or not. Humanitarian statistics mobilize resources and crystalize opposition. Actors involved in the humanitarian field *have* to take them into account – be it to interpret or produce them, or to criticize or refute them. The main effect of humanitarian statistics may be the effect they have on the humanitarian sector itself. Their raison d'être might well be to stabilize the relation between different humanitarian organizations competing for resources, public attention, and access to target populations.

When we took a close look at the genesis of a new humanitarian number, we saw diplomatic negotiations at stake among NGOs, between NGOs and UN agencies, or humanitarian organizations and donor organizations (and, sometimes, between humanitarian organizations and aid recipients). When we watched humanitarian experts figuring out the right numbers, we saw them struggling with uncertainty, with doubts, and with the tensions of the humanitarian field. When we listened to them describing what they were doing, these experts talked not only about science, they talked simultaneously about science, interest, power, and politics. We saw Jean Pictet redefining the humanitarian principles while addressing the conflict between ICRC and the Federation of the Red Cross, we saw the Sphere Project setting universal standards while addressing the conflict between MSF and Oxfam. And we saw OCHA calculating vulnerability in Cameroon while trying to pacify the competition around the UNCHR. Looking at those conflicts historically means escaping the grand narrative of aid organizations that suggests a clear-cut

separation between "scientific reason" on one hand and "political bargaining" on the other. In humanitarian statistics, scientific reason and political bargaining are folded into one another.

This is why this book has focused on figures that are located at the core of the humanitarian doxa – numbers of refugees, numbers of acute malnourished children, crude mortality rates, number of people in need. Not only are these frequently used indicators in humanitarian crisis; they also carry the burden of the humanitarian consensus. The main bias of the critical anthropology of humanitarian quantification may be taking this consensus for granted, while assuming that humanitarian actors agree on figures because they share the same interests. The case studies in this book show quite the opposite. Humanitarian actors hold humanitarian statistics as a fetish not in spite of but *because* of the fragility of their position. The hubris of humanitarian data has been fueled by doubts long before it has been fueled by arrogance.

Thus, questioning humanitarian quantification also means questioning the notion of "consensus" which is the core of the current humanitarian regime. As we saw, the notion of a "shared humanitarian belief" presented in the Humanitarian Charter signed by large NGOs in the early 2000s has been intrinsically linked to a positivist epistemology. The humanitarian regime has historically been framed by different normative horizons, illustrated successively by the Colonial Development and Welfare Act 1940 of late colonial empire, the international conventions of the 1950s to 1970s, and the Code of Conduct of the 1990s. A key feature of the Humanitarian Charter, however, is to celebrate consensus and the unity of the "humanitarian community," and to discard power relations and inequalities (e.g., power relations between North and South, UN agencies and NGOs, donors and operational actors, public and private actors, expatriates and local employees). The Humanitarian Charter defines humanitarian work as a "partnership" among actors moved by "common principles" that are "universal" and sustained by "information" and "transparency." Therefore, the question of how a certain type of statistical knowledge has become the guarantor of humanitarian consensus is central in efforts to understand how the current humanitarian regime works.

To ensure the structuring of the humanitarian field, a central role has been conferred to a set of principles. Among these principles, "impartiality" is probably the least contested, but even this notion has changed a great deal over time. For Dunant in the nineteenth century, impartiality was a principle of non-discrimination. Jean Pictet, in the 1940s and 1950s, changed the meaning of impartiality by introducing the notion of "proportionality" of needs. This opened a new path that eventually led to an understanding of impartiality as something like a mere rule of arithmetic distribution of resources (as in the Code of Conduct's current definition of "impartiality", which asserts that relief aid should be "*calculated* on the basis of needs alone").

Chapter 1 has shown that a major change had taken place between Dunant and Pictet, namely the emergence of a *needology*, a large, heterogeneous yet interlinked web of institutional and scientific bodies of knowledge, all focused on human need: Atwater's work on caloric accounting, Rowntree's poverty line, Maslow's

theory of motivation, as well as countless administrative, military, and scientific surveys on the needs of the worker, the soldier, the poor, and the sick. In spite of their variety, these works shared the conviction that human needs mattered, and that they should be explored, objectified, compared, and quantified. They also shared the conviction that human needs, unlike suffering, were (at least partially) hidden. They shared, finally, the conviction that there was an uncertainty about what people needed, that even people in need could not know what they *truly* needed, and eventually that people in need could not see what only expert knowledge could uncover. The vast majority of this knowledge, however, ignored the colonial population and focused instead on the global North. The notion of "basic needs" eventually travelled the world in the 1970s, building a strong case of universal standards, for their proponents, lowering social expectations and distracting from the struggle for global equality according to their critics.

In Chapter 2, we saw how a UN agency like the UNHCR has learned to classify the needs of refugees. Humanitarian agencies, we found, became inveterate classifiers: They learned to stratify target groups along a sliding scale of needs. When attempting to make sense of forced migration in Central Africa, the UNHCR applied several templates for classifying needs, eventually cutting across legal, economic, and medical categories. Thanks to the long history of thought about needs (including poverty studies and Maslow's hierarchy, for instance), UNHCR was able to create classifications that mixed different modes of ordering (a praxis that also had a long tradition in the UNRRA and other aid agencies). The UNHCR thus contributed to the export and diffusion of needs classifications.

In Chapter 3, we saw how the materiality of humanitarian tools added complexity to the picture. The history of the MUAC band as a tool of humanitarian action really started when Biafran mothers learned to speak the language of humanitarianism: "After almost two years of siege conditions," a medical doctor said, "every mother in Biafra knows what kwashiorkor means, knows that skimmed-dried milk will prevent or cure it, and will make sure her child gets it if it is available."[1] For aid agencies, humanitarian statistics should objectify a population's needs without relying on their testimony. But the question of commensurability led to major tension between the humanitarian's universal claims and the locality of disease. The tropical doctors who invented the MUAC tape wanted to identify malnutrition and make it comparable on a global scale. They set universal standards and thresholds to do so. However, they knew that malnutrition had very different effects on individual patients' bodies. The symptoms of acute malnutrition depended on many factors ranging from cultural practices to the environmental context. Some physicians and nutritionists therefore argued against universal standards and in favor of "local," "ethnic," and "racial" standards. But this suggestion proved to be neither ethically nor politically viable in a post-Holocaust and postcolonial world. From this moment on, humanitarian quantification seemed to be trapped in an artificial polarization between *narrow universal* standards, on one side, and *racial differentialism* on the other. Many tools bear the weight of this tension, tools like MUAC, as well as standardized tests,

standardized daily food rations or supplementary feeding rations like Plumpy'Sup, tents, kitchen sets, and many others.

As we saw in Chapter 4, this tension became obvious in the call for the "standardization" of aid after the Rwandan genocide. The Sphere Project established a list of minimum standards for humanitarian relief that were supposed to be universal. This, the Sphere team argued, would improve the quality of aid, because every crisis, every population, and every aid agency could now be assessed with a unique yardstick. Several NGOs protested, however, and showed the inadequacy of universal standards by listing the many exceptions to the Sphere Project's rules. Even the consultants involved in the Sphere Project were skeptical and the project's leaders were themselves conscious of the pitfalls of universal benchmarks. Although it was indeed possible to define a worldwide threshold for identifying an "emergency," such as a crude mortality rate (CMR) of 1 death per 10,000 persons per day, in practice, this threshold would not be usable in either rich industrialized societies (in which the CMR would be much lower), or in the world's poorest societies (in which the CMR would be almost as high under normal circumstances). A few years later, another solution was adopted: Each region of the world would have its own CMR threshold for defining an emergency. Yet this meant that a catastrophe striking a sub-Saharan African society would now have to produce 35 times more victims per day than it would in Europe to be called an "emergency." Once again, quantitative humanitarianism could not escape the tension between universalism and localism. One aspect of humanitarian that experts were keen to underplay, however, was the localism of humanitarian universalism itself. While it was possible to fix standards and indicators to measure the services and goods delivered to the population, the idea of setting standards to measure "whether we are respecting the dignity and rights of the affected population" and "the potential negative side-effects of the response" (in the words of one expert) was discarded. It was thinkable to fix universal standards for the minimum dietary requirements of refugees, but not for the salaries or the working conditions in refugee camps.

Chapters 5 and 6 looked at how concepts, classifications, tools, and standards came together in Cameroon in the wake of the Central African crisis in 2013/2014. This crisis took place against the backdrop of a new hope that new technologies such as digitalization and computerization would make needs assessment more efficient and more transparent. But here again, when we looked closer at the production of humanitarian data, the idea of robustness vanished. First, we encountered the competition between humanitarian actors. Then, we discovered the ambiguous role of technologies. When hundreds of thousands of refugees arrived from Central Africa and Nigeria, UN agencies and NGOs competed for funds and public attention. The UNHCR registered the refugees and, together with IOM, they produced data according to legal status (refugees, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, etc.). Other organizations, such as UNICEF, preferred data based on vulnerability, such as numbers of children suffering acute or chronic malnutrition. Thus, in order to cope with the massive amount of data produced by the different actors, OCHA used brand new software into which every agency could enter its own indicators, from which the software could calculate

aggregates. But the role played by technology proved to be less straightforward than expected for two reasons.

First, while aid agencies did use mobile phones and an internet connection to produce their data, they did not only rely on high-tech solutions. Most humanitarian quantification was not "digital" at all. It required cables, Jeeps, generators. It smelled more like gasoline than like silicon. Humanitarian data collection is often a banal, low-tech process: One takes notes with pencil and paper, distributes tokens by hand, measures children's arms with MUAC tape, and marks houses with chalk. As a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, the long chain of needs assessment can be derailed because of a defective diesel generator or the lack of ink cartridges, long before any data has been uploaded to the cloud.

Second, computerization was not synonymous with greater transparency. OCHA's software engineers invented a powerful tool for gathering and aggregating data, but the role played by the key algorithm in this process was known to only a handful of specialists. It was no coincidence that the algorithm chosen by OCHA to ultimately aggregate data on vulnerability ended with a mathematical average between carefully balanced sectors. It was not the result of scientific research on the relationship between indicators for the calculation of "vulnerability." It was for the sake of maintaining the fragile equilibrium of the humanitarian field, or, to recall the words of the OCHA, "in order to avoid potentially long and fruitless discussions which could limit the tool's ability to achieve consensus." Thus, the historicization of humanitarian quantification may help us to rethink this "consensus" and to unpack the relationship between technology and collective power.

Technoscience and humanitarian aid

There is growing temptation to delegate big decisions to big data. However, as we saw in the case studies, it is not uncommon for humanitarian experts to overestimate the power of technical tools, while at the same time underestimating the power of institutions. There is certainly hype about humanitarian innovation and its little magic devices. High-tech innovations, such as remote sensing, drones, and big data, are expected to produce better data, while bypassing national and local institutions.[2] Anthropologists have baptized this temptation for technological fixes as "technological solutionism"[3] or the politics of "simple solutions."[4] As the history of a principle such as "impartiality" showed, there is a tendency, in OCHA's tools as well as in other humanitarian agencies' quantitative endeavors, to stipulate an analogy between the ethico-legal notion of humanitarian impartiality and the scientific definition of objectivity; thus, there is a tendency to mistake the calculation of needs with the search for sustainable compromises. This view might overestimate the neutralizing power of mathematical language. The idea that technology-backed quantification will bring more transparency, is, at best, a half-truth.

First, technology does play a key role in the construction of figures, but not in the sense that is commonly assumed. As we saw in the case of the MUAC tape, even

mundane artifacts are not neutral. They not only play their expected role – they do more. When Alfred Zerfas, Adnan Shakir, and David Morley fit malnutrition standards into a material device made of plastic, they did *more* than simply closing a controversy within anthropometry: They transformed the relationship between anthropometry and other fields of knowledge. Not only would anthropometry after MUAC play a much more important role in identifying acute malnutrition than ever before; it would also often be a proxy of food aid and humanitarianism as a whole.[5] Thus, a single, arguably debatable, indicator acquired visibility that even its inventors never imagined (and probably never wished for). Artifacts have effects, regardless of whether we consider them useful. They contribute to shaping the humanitarian field. Once it had become a material object, the pioneers' self-critical doubts were forgotten. Having become material, the data appeared to be an incontestable truth. What had looked fragile now looked solid; what had looked questionable now took on the appearance of certainty.[6]

Second, the rapid growth of numerical data may be mistaken for an increase in knowledge. However, higher visibility does not mean higher greater soundness or accuracy. As Chapters 5 and 6, have shown, more data does not always mean *better* data. Something is lost in the process of data aggregation and becomes a "known-unknown" or a "public secret";[7] that is, a piece of knowledge that is widely known by the experts who produce the data but does not make it into the final report (and definitely not into the press release). Some information may be well-known to many humanitarian workers but remain unknown to their institutions: The interplay between different phenomena within one indicator,[8] the micro-relationships between power and inequality within local societies,[9] the multiple designations of diseases,[10] the strategies of compositions of wealth, and the social ramifications of needs,[11] to name but a few.

Notwithstanding the architectural metaphors that are intended to suggest solidity (*basic*, *fundamental*, *pyramid*, etc.), humanitarian quantitative data is more fragile that it claims, while qualitative data is more accessible than we think.[12] "Evidence-based" humanitarianism had mainly been interpreted in a narrow way; "evidence" meaning only "numbers," and "data" only "quantitative data." However, evidence can also mean historical knowledge, archives, books, testimonies, and much more. As was seen in Chapters 5 and 6, humanitarian *quantification* in practice often works in a similar manner to *qualitative* observation: With direct, face-to-face interaction, and a pen and a piece of paper. The problem does not lie in the nature of quantitative data. They are, obviously, indispensable for decision-making. The problem lies in the artificial separation of quantitative and qualitative data, leading to a relegation of qualitative data as data of less relevance or objectivity. In the "humanitarian overviews" produced by OCHA, as well as in many other reports, the descriptive part is reduced to an appendix consisting of a graph, a map, or a number, while written reports are reduced to commentary on statistics. Qualitative data have gained a reputation for being more opaque, less efficient, and less reliable than numbers. But this reputation may result from an over-idealization of what quantitative data are.

The size of human collectives

As we are facing increasing inequalities on a global scale, the pertinent scale for solidarity and redistribution is a pressing question.[13] Some argue for a return to ethnic or national communities.[14] Others, in contrast, are working toward solidarity on a world scale. Both positions rely on old traditions. Even the idea that humanity is *one* has been present at least since the Renaissance and Bartholomeus de las Casas' famous statements on the unity of humankind.[15] Recently, the universalist position has been more and more supported by an *infrastructure of commensurability* that allows for transnational interventions. This infrastructure exposes the unequal distribution of suffering on the world scale.[16] Thanks to the metonymical property of "needs," this infrastructure also allows for an energetic political imagination of humanity as one. Yet this infrastructure also has a major flaw: It supports only a very thin, *minimalist* version of humanity.

First, humanitarian needology convenes an individualization of suffering. It emphasizes three types of actors: *Individuals* (who suffer), *humanity* as a whole (as a witness and donor), and *experts* (who depict human suffering and decide on intervention). This method of commensuration jumps directly from individual bodies to the whole humanity, without intermediary stages (groups, villages, states, etc.).[17] In Cameroon, aid agencies may hierarchize needs without serious reference to local stratification (governors, mayors, prefects, teachers, *lamidos*, *wakili*, *galdima*, *sarkisaanou*, etc.). On a larger scale, O'Brien's administration might calculate "global need overviews" while silencing social struggles for equality and redistribution. Individuals are seen to have needs that are not linked to social inequalities or power relations, thus implying that the responsibility for a person's suffering ultimately relies on individual responsibility. Humanity is thought of as an aggregate entity. Humanitarian expertise considers "persons in need" to be individuals who are autonomous, independent, and interchangeable. Thus, it bypasses institutions and tends to "depoliticize the issues of power."[18]

A second aspect of minimal universalism is the setting of low standards. As stated in Chapter 1, in the 1970s, the ILO prescribed a daily food ration of 3,000 kcal per person. In 2000, the Sphere standard was 2,100.[19] Admittedly, the ILO estimate was based on an "average adult," while the Sphere standards used an average for a camp population with a "normal demography," i.e. including children and non-workers. But for a similar population, the ICRC's estimate was 2,400, thus showing that a higher standard was at least conceivable. The same is true for several thresholds and standards studied in this book, such as the crude mortality rate definition of an emergency, or the cut-off for "severe acute malnutrition" according to the measurement of a child's upper arm: In 1969, in Biafra, an arm measurement of 13 cm would have qualified as severe acute malnutrition. Today, a malnourished child has to have a thinner arm before they qualify for treatment: The WHO standard for acute severe malnutrition is currently 11.5 cm. In spite of increasing global wealth since the Second World War, the definition of "the bare minimum" has not risen. If anything, it has shrunk.

The question at stake here is the very nature of "humanity": A long-distance society tied through mutual obligations, or a loose bond between people sharing mere "human nature"?[20] In the 1940s, the idea of a vital minimum was closely associated with a claim for social justice and equality, even on a world scale. Now, humanitarianism has become a "prisoner of the contemporary age of inequality," to borrow Samuel Moyn's expression.[21] Humanitarian agencies might want to rethink this type of universalism, for while it is successful in capturing the public's imagination, it is narrow in what it measures – and thus it hollows out solidarity.

Repoliticizing basic needs

History might eventually become a resource for reproblematizing, or even repoliticizing, human needs. The first step – and what this book has been about – is to deontologize "human needs": How did "basic needs" became the lowest common denominator of humanity? It might be helpful here to compare humanitarian transnational solidarity and social welfare provision on a national scale. There are many traditions of defining needs in welfare states: Guaranteed minimum wages, social insurance, and family allowances are examples of institutionalized aid that include a definition of minimum needs. Historically, this kind of welfare provision has evolved from an "absolute" and minimal definition of necessity, to a definition linked to growth indicators, for example, prices, salaries, or GDP.[22] In any case, the methods used to calculate welfare provisions are matters of political and social struggle, not of mere knowledge production.

Another approach to unpacking basic needs is to draw on the many historical examples of anti-"basic needs" critique. A first reservoir of criticism is of course to be found in humanitarian expertise itself: The people who produce humanitarian data are often the most critical of it. Derick Jelliffe, one of the initiators of MUAC, did not stop warning his colleagues about the possibility of "false negatives" (i.e. the possibility that this measurement would miss undernourished children).[23] Both the Sphere Project leaders and their consultants often admitted that the thresholds they chose were "arbitrary."[24] While measuring malnutrition in eastern and northern Cameroon, UNICEF nutritionists painstakingly listed all the good reasons they had for being skeptical about their own numbers. As we have seen in this book, experts sometimes love self-criticism and always love to criticize other colleagues' numbers.[25] Expert knowledge is thus a mine of inspiration for criticism of quantification. At times, it is epitomized in vocal controversies for example, as in the debate about the French letter against the Sphere standards.[26] Sometimes, they are well publicized, as was the former MSF president Rony Brauman's skepticism about needs assessments: "Who is capable of really defining what 'basic needs' of human beings are?"[27]

Another tradition of probably more radical critique can be found in the history of philosophy. While Abraham Maslow was inventing his pyramid of needs in New York, in their Los Angeles exile, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer

were theorizing about the limits of the category of "needs."[28] In 1942, the Frankfurt School refuted the natural character of and rejected the distinction between basic (or material) needs and secondary (or ideal) needs.[29] In a similar vein, but 25 years later, the "French theorists" rediscovered the notion.[30] For Jean Baudrillard, need was nothing other than "a function induced in individuals by the internal logic of the system." He went as far as to write: "there are only needs because the system needs them."[31] For him, "needs" were nothing more than a product of ideology, an idea of economists and psychologists, a metaphysical deception: "Everything that speaks in terms of need is magical thinking," he charged.[32] There is no such thing as a "vital anthropological minimum" or an "irreducible zone."[33] "Nowhere," he wrote, "is man faced with his own needs."[34] And Gilles Deleuze added: "As soon as problems are posed in terms of need, what is invoked is in the end assumed to be law, both the nature of these needs, and of their distribution, and of the measure of their satisfaction. To put the problems in terms of needs is already to appeal, I think, to that which will be revealed to be a partisan organization."[35] Twenty years later, and this time in the tradition of critical and feminist sociology, Nancy Fraser again demonstrated the political character of needs. Scientists and bureaucrats artificially isolate *needs* from *interests*, Fraser explains, and thus produce a concept of needs as naturally occurring in an attempt to end political discussion.[36]

Experts and philosophers, however, have not done more to debunk the idea of basic needs than social movements. After the Second World War, the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs (CGT) fought against the definition of the "vital minimum" that the French employers wanted to impose upon the definition of minimal wages. At the same time, in the colonies, the Commerce Worker's Union (EMCIBA) of Senegal denounced the colonial administration's pseudo-"scientific" definition of minimum needs that set different standards for African workers and for Europeans. In the 1970s, a group of postcolonial leaders were to conduct a similar attack on the notion of needs on a different scale. Countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, now organized in the New International Economic Order (NIEO), dismissed the notion of "basic needs" proposed by the World Bank, as a mere distraction from the more important question of global economic inequality and exploitation.[37] When I met the Cameroonian politician Bernard Njonga in 2016, he explained that he expected malnutrition in Cameroon (using the term "famine") to be fought not by NGOs, but in parliament, in elections, and on the streets.[38]

One of the reasons that people have historically resisted expert knowledge of basic needs is probably because this notion suffers from the projected shadow of Maslow's pyramid: A concept of needs that is both universalist and differentialist in a highly political manner. While the happy few at the summit of the pyramid in search of "self-realization" shall be asked what they need, at the bottom of the pyramid, the many in search of fulfilling "physiological and security needs" should leave it to the experts to determine what they truly need. Rethinking such assumptions might help to formulate a wider vision of humanity.

Notes

1 Gans, Bruno. A Biafran relief mission. *The Lancet* 293, no. 7596 (1969): 660–665, here p. 662.

2 Henderson, J. Vernon, et al. "Measuring Economic Growth from Outer Space." *The American Economic Review*, vol. 102, no. 2, 2012, pp. 994–1028.

3 Morozov, Evgeny. *To save everything, click here: The folly of technological solutionism*. New York: Public Affairs, 2013.

4 Wailoo, Keith, Livingston, Julie, Epstein, Steven, and Aronowitz, Robert (ed.). *Three shots at prevention: The HPV Vaccine and the Politics of Medicine's Simple Solutions*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

5 See Chapter 3, for instance, the use of MUAC by Kristalina Georgieva, the European Union Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response.

6 The German NGO Welthungerhilfe is now working, together with Microsoft, on a mobile phone app that can screen children to immediately identify chronic and acute malnutrition. This "Child Growth Monitor" promises "accurate measurement" and "immediate data." See https://childgrowthmonitor.org/ (Accessed February 2019). The history of MUAC begs caution about the use of this kind of innovation.

7 Geissler, 2013.

8 See Chapter 6.

9 See Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre. La crise alimentaire de 2004–2005 au Niger en context. *Afrique contemporaine* 1 (2008): 17–37.

10 Pool, Robert. *Dialogue and the interpretation of illness: Conversations in a Cameroon village*. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2003.

11 Guyer, Jane I. Wealth in people, wealth in things: Introduction. *The Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 83–90; Guyer, Jane I. and Belinga, Samuel M. Eno. Wealth in people as wealth in knowledge: Accumulation and composition in equatorial Africa. *The Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 91–120.

12 One might recall the advice of Hugh Byrne, who, in the late 1980s, reviewed a humanitarian handbook produced by Oxfam: "I believe that a handbook in the wrong hands can be a lethal weapon. It cannot turn a Clark Gable into a Superman, and it cannot turn student adventurers into development personnel, or dabblers into professionals" Byrne, Hugh. Review of the field directors' handbook: An Oxfam manual for development workers. Pratt, Brian and Boyden, Jo (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985: 512. *Community Development Journal* 21, no. 3 (1986): 239–240.

13 Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2014; Milanovic, Branko. *Global inequality: A new approach for the age of globalization*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016; Alvaredo, Facundo, Chancel, Lucas, Piketty, Thomas, Saez, Emmanuel, and Zucman, Gabriel (eds.). *World inequality report 2018*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

14 Müller, Jan-Werner. *What is populism?* London: Penguin, 2017.

15 *Bartholomé de las Casas, Obras Completas*, quoted by: Douzinas, Costas. Seven Theses on Human Rights: (1) The Idea of Humanity, in *Critical Legal Thinking*, 30 May 2013. Mazower, Mark. *Governing the world: The history of an idea*. Penguin, 2012; Rist, Gilbert. *Le développement: Histoire d'une croyance occidentale*, 4ème éd. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2013; Klose, Fabian and Miriam, Thulin. European concepts and practices of humanity in historical perspective. In *Humanity: A history of European concepts in practice from the sixteenth century to the present*, Klose, Fabian, and Miriam, Thulin (eds.), Göttingen: V&R, 2016: 9–20; Mazlish, Bruce. *The Idea of Humanity in a Global Era*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2009.

16 The expression "unequal distribution of suffering" is drawn from Geissler, P. Wenzel. Studying trial communities: Anthropological and historical inquiries into ethos, politics and economy of medical research in Africa. In *Evidence, ethos and experiment: The anthropology and history of medical research in Africa*, Geissler, P. Wenzel and Molyneux, Catherine (eds.), New York: Berghahn, 2011: 1–27, here p. 12.

17 And the fact that the notion of needs can be calibrated to suit a certain scale in a second step ("community needs," "children's needs," "needs of elderly people") does not disqualify its universalist function.

18 Satterthwaite, 2011: 872–873. See also Davis, Kevin, Kingsbury, Benedict, and Merry, Engle Sally. Introduction: The local-global life of indicators: Law, power, and resistance. In *The quiet power of indicators: Measuring governance, corruption, and rule of law*, Davis, Kevin, Kingsbury, Benedict, and Merry, Engle Sally (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015: 1–26.

19 At the beginning of the 20th century, Seebohm Rowntree had set his "poverty line" based on a diet that represented 3,478 kcal per day for men, 2,923 for women, and 2,634 for children. He acknowledged that the diets were less generous than the "Poor Law" menus. See: Bradshaw, Jonathan (2000) Preface for the centennial edition of Poverty: A study in town life. In: Rowntree, B. Seebohm, *Poverty: A study of town life*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2000, p. XXX.

20 For a critique of the notion of "human nature," see Ingold, Tim. Against human nature. In *Evolutionary epistemology, language and culture*, Gontier, Nathalie, Jean Paul Van Bendegem, and Diederik Aerts (eds), 259–281. Dordrecht: Springer, 2006.

21 Moyn, 2018: 6.

22 These aids rely on the long tradition of the emergence of the social state which François Ewald studied. In the face of risks (illness, unemployment, old age, work accidents, maternity, invalidity, death, familial responsibilities), diverse techniques of social protection emerged (foresight, assurance, mutuality, social security, state assistance) of which charity aid is only one facet, and international humanitarian aid again a more specific variation. Ewald, François. *L'Etat providence*. Paris: Grasset, 2014. See Chapter 1 for the example of the French minimum wage.

23 See Chapter 3.

24 See Chapter 4.

25 For an overview of needs assessment practices (and a critique thereof): Darcy, James, and Hofmann, Charles-Antoine. According to need. Needs assessment and decision-making in the humanitarian sector. ODI *Humanitarian Policy Group Report* 15 (2003): 1–80.

26 See Chapter 4.

27 Brauman, Rony and Petit, Philippe. *Humanitaire: Le dilemme*. Paris: Textuel, 1996: 98.

28 This seminar reunited Theodor Adorno, Günther Anders, Bertolt Brecht, Hanns Eisler, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Ludwig Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Hans Reichenbach, and Berthold Viertel. Four sessions of the seminar were dedicated to the idea of need. The discussion's protocols are published in Adorno, Theodor W. Diskussionen aus einem Seminar über die Theorie der Bedürfnisse [1942]. In *Gesammelte Schriften Band 12: Nachgelassene Schriften 1931–1949*, Horkheimer, Max (ed.), Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1985: 559–586. For the contributions of Adorno and Horkheimer, see Adorno, Theodor W. Thesen über Bedürfnis [1942]. In *Gesammelte Schriften Band 8: Soziologische Schriften I*, Tiedemann, Rolf (ed.), Suhrkamp, 2003: 392–396; Horkheimer, Max. Zum Problem der Bedürfnisse. In *Gesammelte Schriften Band 12: Nachgelassene Schriften 1941–1949*. Horkheimer, Max (ed.), Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1985: 252–256.

29 "Need is a social category. Nature, the 'drive,' is contained within it. But the social moment and the natural moment of needs do not let themselves be separated from one another as primary and secondary, in order then to establish a hierarchy of satisfactions" Adorno, 2003 (1942): 392. (Translation JG).

30 Baudrillard, Jean. La genèse idéologique des besoins. *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 47 (1969): 45–68.

31 Baudrillard, 1969: 63.

32 Baudrillard, 1969: 52.

33 Baudrillard, 1969: 61–62.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Course led by Gilles Deleuze at the Université de Vincennes: Cours Vincennes: 28 May 1973, transcribed by Fanny Deleuze.
36 For Fraser, the West marginalizes the needs of minorities and regards them as "outside" of politics. The opponents of the welfare state in the United States criticize the interventions that address the needs of populations and that provoke dependence and passivity among beneficiaries. Fraser, Nancy. Talking about needs: Interpretive contests as political conflicts in welfare-state societies. *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (January 1989): 291–313. Nancy Fraser distinguishes a "thin" definition and a "thick" definition of needs. At a level of heightened generality, one has "thin" needs – for example, the whole world needs food – but at a more precise level, one must know what kind of food, what quantity, etc.
37 See Chapter 1.
38 Interview with Bernard Njonga, President of CRAC [Croire au Cameroun]. Headquarter of CRAC Yaoundé. Interview, March 2016.

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