

SECTION 22

**HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS – THE  
BOUNDARIES OF MORALITY AND POLITICS**

— SECTION CONVENORS —



**Elvira Rosert**  
University of Hamburg



**Charlotte Dany**  
Goethe-Universität Frankfurt

This section aims to challenge the current low prioritization of humanitarian affairs in IR. In our understanding, humanitarian affairs cover different areas such as humanitarian aid, international humanitarian law, and human rights protection through humanitarian intervention. Studying the core principles guiding humanitarian action – humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence – promises to shed light on fundamental questions related to motives for behavior, the role of interests vs. the role of norms, or power relations.

[www.eisapec18.org](http://www.eisapec18.org) · [www.eisa-net.org](http://www.eisa-net.org)

**Abstract Deadline: 1 February 2018**

Abstract Submission Guidelines: <http://www.eisapec18.org/abstract-submission-guidelines.htm>

**Dr. Charlotte Dany**

Assistant Professor for International Relations

Goethe-University Frankfurt

Theodor-W.-Adorno-Platz 6

60629 Frankfurt

eMail: [c.dany@soz.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:c.dany@soz.uni-frankfurt.de) | Twitter: @charlo\_da | Phone: +49-(0)69-79836636

**Prof. Dr. Elvira Rosert**

Junior Professor for International Relations

Universität Hamburg

Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy

Beim Schlump 83, 20144 Hamburg

eMail: [elvira.rosert@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:elvira.rosert@uni-hamburg.de) | Twitter: @ellie\_ro | Phone: +49-(0)40-866077-15

EISA PAN-European Conference

12-15 September 2018

Prague

## **S 22: HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

### **THE BOUNDARIES OF MORALITY AND POLITICS**

#### **Section Details**

Large-scale emergencies such as violent conflicts, refugee crises, and natural disasters have tremendously increased the number of people in need of humanitarian protection worldwide. According to estimates of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 130 million people are currently in need of humanitarian aid and protection, which amounts to the biggest humanitarian catastrophe since WWII. But in International Relations (IR), this growing relevance is not sufficiently reflected, with humanitarian affairs being analyzed only as sub-realms of established policy fields, such as security, human rights, development, or environment.

This section aims to counter this low significance of humanitarian affairs in IR. In our understanding, humanitarian affairs cover different areas such as humanitarian aid, international humanitarian law, and human rights protection through humanitarian intervention. Studying the core principles guiding humanitarian action – humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence – promises to shed light on fundamental questions related to motives for behavior, the role of interests vs. the role of norms, or to power relations. The diversity of humanitarian problems as well as the multitude of actors involved in the coordination, implementation, and reception of humanitarian policies make it a study field par excellence for scholars of Global Governance. The ethical dilemmas of Humanitarianism provide an opportunity to explicitly address moral and normative questions.

The rationale of this section is, hence, to establish Humanitarian Affairs as a distinct field of research in IR. The discipline should become more relevant for responding to human suffering. To this end, the section assembles different theoretical, methodological, and empirical approaches to humanitarian affairs while at the same time trying to identify recurring themes and instructive perspectives.

#### **Tentative Panels**

##### **What is “Humanitarian” in International Relations? Meanings of A Contested Concept**

The adjective “humanitarian,” used in different combinations, denotes areas as different as the law of armed conflict (international humanitarian law), emergency assistance after natural or man-made disasters (humanitarian aid), or military action to protect human rights (humanitarian intervention). But what motivates the framing of an issue as “humanitarian”, and what effects does this framing have? At times, it seems to be a highly idealistic term highlighting the moral urge to maintain basic standards of humanity even under

extreme circumstances; at times, humanitarianism is called a business, highlighting its economic purposes; at times, it even seems to be a highly political term, used to justify and legitimize certain actions. Not only might the meaning of the term be at risk of stretching – even worse, it may be (mis)used as legitimizing disguise for actions contrary to its main intent. This panel aims to highlight the different and contradictory uses of the term and its political effects. For example, calling something “humanitarian” might either politicize or de-politicize an issue. Overall, the panel discusses whether there is an essence of “humanitarianism”, or whether it is becoming an “empty signifier.” The panel invites papers empirically reconstructing or normatively delineating the meaning of “humanitarian” with the aim to understand the content and boundaries of what’s humanitarian in international politics.

### **Humanitarian Issues: Urgent Problems Demanding Solutions**

In this panel, we investigate what triggers international attention to certain problems but not others, and what explains the scale and the character of responses. Many different global problems have severe humanitarian implications: the protection of refugees and migrants, the use of certain weapons in warfare, the protection of civilians in armed conflict, the protection of combatants hors de combat, climate change, the protection of humanitarian workers, as well as assistance to victims of conflicts and disasters, to name just a few examples. But they are not all equally high on the agenda of political institutions or the public. The panel is interested in exploring a) the diversity of humanitarian issues, b) different theoretical perspectives used for their analysis, and c) the methods applied. It seeks to answer questions such as: Which issues are particularly dominant, both in practice and research, and why? Who is defined as worthy of humanitarian protection, and why? What are the empirical and theoretical voids in this field? We invite papers addressing these and similar questions while analyzing and comparing specific humanitarian problems.

### **Humanitarian Governance: Challenges for Cooperation, Legitimacy, and Effectiveness**

As the scope of what humanitarianism entails is extending, so is the amount and the spectrum of different actors who are involved in governing humanitarian affairs. This comes along with new modes of governance and new problems of cooperation, coordination, and legitimacy. How should we assess the involvement of the private sector? How do humanitarian actors deal with the scarcity of resources? How does institutional overlap affect effectiveness? We are interested in contributions describing, explaining, and evaluating these developments, especially with regard to their (unintended) consequences, paradoxes, and implications for power relations. As the local level and the recipients of aid are mostly neglected in existing research, papers addressing governance issues at this level and giving voice to the receivers of aid or those in need of protection are particularly welcome.

### **Humanitarian Politics: Between Interests and Norms**

This panel calls attention to the drivers of humanitarian action, which may be situated between interests and norms. It looks at the motivations, interests, and strategies behind humanitarian action of governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental agencies. It discusses the role of altruism, security concerns, and economic interests (among others) in the setting of humanitarian standards as well as in the adoption and implementation of humanitarian policies. We are particularly interested in describing patterns of similarities and differences between the different types of actors to

investigate whether stereotypes such as do-gooders, instruments of the powerful, or hypocrites pursuing other interests under the guise of humanitarianism apply at all. All kinds of actors might act both normatively and strategically in different situations – NGOs reacting to market constraints; recipient-states going forum shopping to assign the responsibility for refugees on their territory to one particular international organization; donor-states feeling the normative obligation to provide funds for emergencies. Overall, the contributions are invited to explore whether and how political interests alter the normative foundation of humanitarian action.

### **Humanitarian Ethics: Navigating Moral Dilemmas**

Humanitarian action comes in different disguises, such as aid, human rights protection, intervention, or law. But it is always based on and justified through strong moral norms. Yet, these moral norms may differ, and may change over time. As well, humanitarian action raises ethical concerns and moral dilemmas such as disempowerment, dependency, and the loss of autonomy. Experiences of the past decades have also raised concrete questions, such as: Can victimization be avoided? Are actors morally obliged to accept humanitarian aid? How can humanitarian action be provided while respecting the sovereignty of the affected, both individuals and states? Is the use of military force to deliver assistance legitimate? In this panel, we ask how humanitarian action deals with these moral dilemmas on the ground of the existing moral norms, and how these norms can navigate through these dilemmas or need to be adapted. To address these questions, we invite contributions from different perspectives. We are as much interested in practical-oriented contributions that analyze whether and how different actors perceive these challenges and how they deal with them, as in theoretical papers outlining normative approaches to moral dilemmas of humanitarian action, and possible answers to these challenges.

### **Roundtable: Perspectives for Humanitarian Research in IR**

The concluding roundtable will wrap-up the previous discussions by summarizing substantive insights, but also by considering development perspectives for the research field. What similar questions have been addressed? What main challenges – and solutions – have been identified? How were insights from the field integrated into research, and what results are, indeed, relevant for the practitioners involved in humanitarian affairs? The aim of the roundtable will be to reflect on the question why humanitarian affairs have not become a distinct research field yet, and come up with questions for a research agenda on humanitarian affairs, which is theoretically sophisticated, does resonate with IR scholarship, and at the same time may generate policy-relevant insights for present and future challenges of humanitarian politics.