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“AID AND PROTECT? THE LIMITS OF NEOCOLONIAL SAVIORISM AND HUMANITARIANISM”

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Background & RQ

Background

Humanitarian aid organizations are not perfect. Although they are tasked with and do help millions of people annually who are affected by violent conflicts, they exhibit flaws in their approach. These flaws have been researched by scholars, providing shortfalls to these organizations. What does this mean for the future of humanitarian aid?

Research Question

To what degree do humanitarian aid organizations reflect neocolonial ideas about the “civilizing mission,” and what effect does that value system have on their ability to reduce harm suffered by conflict-affected populations?

Literature Review

Two Areas of Research

Logistical Harms

- Aid is looted, often as a conflict strategy by rebel groups who also need its resources.
- Looted aid increases war durations.
- The presence of humanitarian aid prompts increased violence against civilian populations.
- Where aid is distributed pinpoints the locations of vulnerable populations.

Internal Values Producing Harm

- Humanitarian aid organizations harbor and display neocolonial and white saviorism values.
- Humanitarian aid organizations operate as corporations, using imagery, short prompts, or a combination of the two in order to increase funding.
 - Reinforces a problematic binary



Hypothesis

Could these two bodies of research be interconnected?

Do the values of the organization influence the organization's ability to reduce harm?



H1: The more humanitarian aid organizations' values reflect neocolonialism and saviorism, the more harms that will be experienced by conflict affected populations.

Methodology (Variables)

Independent Variables

| Presence of Saviorism | Criteria |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>Saviorism Present</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Removal of agency<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ “Victim” or “vulnerable” AND no visual indication of self-determination◦ Imagery only depicts affected populations receiving aid• Affected populations as the object of the sentence, rather than the subject<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Humanitarian aid workers as the actors• “Aid recipients” as minimization and removal of individuality• Physical stature of affected populations<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Angle of photo; aid workers higher in the frame, affected populations seen on the ground◦ spaciality |
| <i>Saviorism Absent</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Activity and action displayed, not simply receiving aid<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Doing things; going to school, helping others in need, celebrating◦ Everyday activities captured and displayed◦ Political action/organizing◦ Speaking with reporters• Affected populations as the subject, not the object of sentences<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Affected populations as the actors• Images that do not magnify distance or angles of aid workers and affected populations |

TABLE 1: Hypothesized Presence of Saviorism

| Presence of Neocolonialism | Criteria |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <i>Neocolonialism Present</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Manipulation of donors based on emotion<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Imagery◦ Messages• Marketing vulnerability• Donor countries limited to Global North• Role of colonial powers not recognized<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Saving Black women from Black men displayed• Absence of local populations acting to help affected populations<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Erasure of domestic political agency• Images denying civilization<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ More natural landscapes, lack of infrastructure shown◦ Phrases focused on “underdeveloped regions” |
| <i>Neocolonialism Absent</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nuanced imagery• Varied funding sources• Recognizing role of former colonial powers<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Structural oppression recognized• Discussions of local populations acting to help affected populations<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Domestic organizations, governments, ministries• Imagery depicting civilization<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Cities shown, not simply natural landscapes |

TABLE 2: Hypothesized Presence of Neocolonialism

Dependent Variable

| Harms | Criteria |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>Harms Present</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased death tolls<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Refugee camp bombings◦ Increased violence by perpetrators after aid is distributed◦ Aid not reaching destination and looted◦ Increased infant mortality• Increased injury• Increased illness spread• Increased displacement• Increased food insecurity• Increased sexual violence• Increased poverty rates• Increased damage to infrastructure• Decreased education rates• Decreased access to medical care |
| <i>Harms Absent</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decreased death tolls<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Lack of refugee camps bombed◦ Aid reaching destination and positively affecting conflict-affected population◦ Decreased infant mortality• Decrease in injury• Decreased illness spread• Decreased displacement• Decreased food insecurity• Decreased sexual violence<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Effective care for survivors• Decreased poverty rates• Decreased damage to infrastructure• Increased education rates• Increased access and effectiveness of medical care |

TABLE 3: Hypothesized Harms

Qualitative Analysis

Quanitative Analysis



Methodology (Case Selection)

To construct a study to test my hypothesis, a single case study was selected.



To find a conflict to study, several parameters were put into place; 2010 onward but had ended by 2023, humanitarian aid involvement, only one conflict in the region, conflict was between two two groups, etc.



South Sudanese Civil War (2013-2020) selected.
ICRC selected as the humanitarian aid organization due to heavy involvement and well-known nature.

Results (IV)

Presence of saviorism displayed by the ICRC was found, yet more often in the Facts and Figures newsletters rather than the Annual Reports. Not all criteria tested for was present. In addition, some criteria was missing (NO DATA), such as a report containing no photos to test for traces of saviorism.

| White Saviorism Present | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|--|------------------|---------------------|
| | "Victim" OR "Vulnerable W/ NO Self-Determination | Imagery ONLY Depicting Aid Receival | Affected Populations as Objects of Sentences | Affected Populations Being Acted Upon (Imagery OR Description) | "Aid Recipients" | Skewed Photo Angles |
| 2013 (AR) | × | NO DATA | × | × | × | NO DATA |
| 2013 (FF) | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA |
| 2014 (AR) | × | NO DATA | × | × | × | NO DATA |
| 2014 (FF) | ✓ | × | × | ✓ | × | ✓ |
| 2015 (AR) | × | NO DATA | × | × | × | NO DATA |
| 2015 (FF) | ✓ | × | × | ✓ | × | ✓ |
| 2016 (AR) | × | NO DATA | × | × | × | NO DATA |
| 2016 (FF) | ✓ | × | × | ✓ | × | ✓ |
| 2017 (AR) | × | NO DATA | × | × | × | NO DATA |
| 2017 (FF) | ✓ | NO DATA | × | ✓ | × | NO DATA |
| 2018 (AR) | × | NO DATA | × | × | × | NO DATA |
| 2018 (FF) | ✓ | × | × | ✓ | × | × |

Results (IV)

The Absence of saviorism was also found, especially in the Annual Reports released by the ICRC. Similarly, some reports lacked data for certain criteria.

White Saviorism Absent

| | Activity & Action (Photos OR Description) | Affected Populations as Subjects of Sentences | Affected Populations as Actors | Images W/O Skewed Angles |
|-----------|---|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2013 (AR) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2013 (FF) | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA |
| 2014 (AR) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2014 (FF) | × | ✓ | × | ✓ |
| 2015 (AR) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2015 (FF) | × | ✓ | × | ✓ |
| 2016 (AR) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2016 (FF) | × | ✓ | × | ✓ |
| 2017 (AR) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2017 (FF) | × | ✓ | × | NO DATA |
| 2018 (AR) | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2018 (FF) | × | ✓ | × | ✓ |

Results (IV)

Presence of neocolonialism displayed by the ICRC was also found and was more prevalent in the Facts and Figures reports. In addition, some criteria was once again missing, often in regards to a lack of photos in the specified report.

| Neocolonialism Present | | | | | | | |
|---|---------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Pathos to Manipulate Donors (Imagery With Text) | | Marketing Vulnerability | Donor Countries ONLY Global North | Colonial Powers NOT Recognized | Erasure of Local Populations/Domestic Political Agency | Images Denyng Civilization | "Underdeveloped Regions" |
| 2013 (AR) | NO DATA | × | × | ✓ | × | NO DATA | × |
| 2013 (FF) | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA |
| 2014 (AR) | NO DATA | × | × | ✓ | × | NO DATA | × |
| 2014 (FF) | × | ✓ | × | ✓ | × | × | × |
| 2015 (AR) | NO DATA | × | × | ✓ | × | NO DATA | × |
| 2015 (FF) | × | ✓ | × | ✓ | × | ✓ | × |
| 2016 (AR) | NO DATA | × | × | ✓ | × | NO DATA | × |
| 2016 (FF) | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓ | × | × | × |
| 2017 (AR) | NO DATA | × | × | ✓ | × | NO DATA | × |
| 2017 (FF) | NO DATA | ✓ | × | ✓ | × | NO DATA | × |
| 2018 (AR) | NO DATA | × | × | ✓ | × | NO DATA | × |
| 2018 (FF) | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓ | × | × | × |

Results (IV)

Neocolonialism was also absent for several criteria in both the Facts and Figures reports and Annual Reports. Other criteria was missing.

| Neocolonialism Absent | | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Nuanced Imagery | Varied Funding Sources | Recognized Former Colonial Roles | Discussions of Local Populations | Imagery Depicting Civilization |
| 2013 (AR) | NO DATA | × | × | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2013 (FF) | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA | NO DATA |
| 2014 (AR) | NO DATA | ✓ | × | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2014 (FF) | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓ | ✓ |
| 2015 (AR) | NO DATA | ✓ | × | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2015 (FF) | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓ | × |
| 2016 (AR) | NO DATA | ✓ | × | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2016 (FF) | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓ | ✓ |
| 2017 (AR) | NO DATA | ✓ | × | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2017 (FF) | NO DATA | ✓ | × | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2018 (AR) | NO DATA | ✓ | × | ✓ | NO DATA |
| 2018 (FF) | ✓ | ✓ | × | ✓ | ✓ |



Results (DV)

Statistics for harm were collected from scholars, the ACLED dataset, the CRS, and the World Bank.

Statistics from the World Bank showed that the degree in harm (for both lethal and non-violent harm) did not decrease throughout the conflicts duration. In addition, several criteria was missing (such as hunger insecurity, sexual violence, poverty rates, etc).

Conclusions were unable to be drawn regarding the ICRC's ability to reduce logistical harms for conflict-affected populations. No data was able to be found detailing these statistics.

As a result, the dependent variable remains inconclusive.



Conclusion

- In referencing the hypothesis of this study, it remains unknown whether internal values of humanitarian aid organizations impact their ability to reduce harms suffered.
- However, this study supports a portion of prior literature; humanitarian aid organizations (in this case, the ICRC), exhibit neocolonial and saviorism tropes.

- Although the dependent variable of this study was inconclusive, it does not mean that prior research was incorrect. Studies have demonstrated that humanitarian aid organizations create additional harms for violence-affected populations.
- Instead, the parameters of this study may have limited the conclusivness of the independent variable.



Suggestions

- Reframe the study. More cases, more humanitarian aid organizations.
- How can the dependent variable be studied to show a decrease or increase in harm as a direct result of aid intervention?
- A more reliable way to test the independent variable.
- Perhaps interviewing humanitarian aid staff. Do they believe the organization they are working for exhibits neocolonialism and white saviorism?