Relief Governance in Fragile Contexts: Applying a ‘Political Settlements’ Lens

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Humanitarian aid in fragile contexts

• Disputed concepts in humanitarian aid: neutrality, humanitarian space
• Both concepts difficult, as humanitarian aid always has political implications
• Currently change of political conditions for relief aid in ‘recipient’ countries: neo-sovereignty
• Heavy implications on humanitarian aid
• ‘Political settlements’ approach: does this make sense, and how could it assist?

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Becoming more political - the donor side

• ‘resilience’ concept has changed face of humanitarian aid in two ways:
  • new focus on people, societies, markets – focus on local structures, circumventing state level
  • Blurring boundaries of relief and development
• Despite other claims, changes political implications of relief/aid
Becoming more political - the recipient side

• reaction to ‘resilience’, but also broader political movement
• g7+, developmental regimes offer strong visions (‘resilient nations’)
• ‘neo-sovereignty’ – national ownership (controlled by governments), but responsibility with ‘outsourced’ accountability
• No acceptance of ‘just’ assisting people, communities, societies; national level wants control
The South Sudan case

- December 2013: begin of civil war after collapse of fragile South Sudanese political settlement
- Relief aid became tool of warfare – enabling of government to completely neglect humanitarian situation
- Long-term structural consequences
- ‘captured’ situation (Barnett/Zuercher 2009) developed, relief agencies blackmailed
‘Political settlements’

- ‘bargaining outcomes among contending elites’ (Di John/Putzel)
- Actors, their interests, formal and informal institutions – government just one of those
- Complex, multi-layered systems
- Permanent informal process of elite bargaining, international actors become part

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Relief impact on political settlements

Based on Parks/Cole 2010

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Relief governance and ‘political settlements’

- Impact of relief/aid:
  - Shifting power-relations within elite settlement
  - Strengthening elite settlement against competitors

- No point in trying to deliberately alter political settlements by using aid (e.g. Khan 2013, ‘results too uncertain’)

- ‘political settlements’ analysis supports conceptualization of political effects of humanitarian relief
Relief under neo-sovereign conditions

• Neo-sovereign condition could develop into a game changer for humanitarian aid

• No easy way out – no neutral space anymore, under conditions of neo-sovereignty, humanitarian aid becomes strategic resource in for political settlement stabilisation or in elite bargaining

• Humanitarian relief is structurally beyond ‘do no harm’ in fragile contexts, as there is no neutral space

• Political assessments – political decisions

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Open questions

• How to deal with political settlements – and governments as their formal institutional element?

• Is there a point of disengagement (as conditionality won’t work)?

• Merge aid and development under an explicit political mandate?