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Lecture Notes

COMPETING APPROACHES IN HUMANITARIAN POLICIES

Mandates, Visions & Methods

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Fiker Institute hosted Sarah El-Abd, PhD candidate in political science and international relations at Sciences Po, Paris for a lecture on competing approaches in humanitarian policies, exploring how a single institutional ecosystem engages with multiple humanitarian and political mandates. Below are the key takeaways from the lecture.

WHAT IS "HUMANITARIAN SPACE" AND WHO ACTS IN IT?

Rather than a physical zone on a map, "humanitarian space" is the relational and political space in which humanitarian actors can operate safely and effectively. That space is built on four core principles derived from the Geneva Conventions—humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence—but also on trust, consent, and acceptance from affected communities and parties to conflict. When these principles are respected, access and safety expand; when they are doubted, the humanitarian space contracts, and operations become more dangerous or impossible to carry out.

The contemporary humanitarian field should be viewed as an institutional ecosystem rather than a single, coherent sector. UN coordination structures and agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, international and local NGOs, civil society groups, donors, states, de facto authorities, media, and data providers all share the same space. Because each actor has distinct mandates, priorities, and accountability lines, they often look at the same crisis—a refugee influx, a natural disaster, a protracted conflict—and see different problems and solutions. Competition is not necessarily a coordination failure; it is built into how different mandates and normative frameworks position actors from the outset.

WHAT ARE THE DRIVERS OF COMPETITION IN THE HUMANITARIAN SPHERE?

There are four structural drivers that make overlapping and competing approaches inevitable. First, the ecosystem itself multiplies actors and interests. Second, "mandate layering" and "triple-hatting" push organizations—especially multilateral missions—to take on humanitarian, political, and security tasks simultaneously, rather than in clearly separated roles. Third, the funding architecture relies heavily on earmarked, project-based financing that often bundles several objectives into a single grant, encouraging actors to stretch mandates to match donor priorities. Finally, accountability asymmetries mean not all actors are held to the same standards, which shapes incentives and power relations within the system.

These structural factors show up in three main arenas. The first is authority and legitimacy—who has the right to define needs, decide what counts as humanitarian

action, and set the priorities of a response. The second is financing and dependency, where money structures power, subcontracting relationships, and strategic choices, often placing local partners in subordinate roles with limited decision-making power. The third is operational reach and access: which actors can safely enter which areas, under what conditions, and with whose consent. For civilians and local organizations, competition is experienced through gatekeeping, shifting eligibility criteria, repeated re-registration for aid, and uneven coverage between "reachable" and "unreachable" communities.

Local NGOs and communities are the first to witness humanitarian competition—and the first to absorb its costs. They may be asked to represent entire communities without meaningful inclusion in agenda setting or coordination forums, effectively acting as intermediaries while others control strategy, reporting, and budgets. Sub-contracting can transfer not just tasks but risk, with local partners exposed on the front lines while international organizations retain decision-making power. Constant shifts in funding priorities turn aid into a "moving target," forcing civilians to adapt to changing program models—from food parcels to cash assistance to new thematic projects—that do not always reflect their own definitions of need.

WHAT CAN THE CASE OF MINUSMA TEACH US?

MINUSMA, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, illustrated how these dynamics play out when humanitarian, political, and security mandates converge in a single theater. Deployed into an active conflict with deep historical grievances and multiple armed actors, MINUSMA was tasked with stabilization, support to a peace process, extension of state authority, civilian protection, human rights monitoring, and enabling humanitarian delivery. Within this crowded landscape of missions, NGOs, and UN agencies, one mechanism became particularly revealing: "Quick Impact Projects" (QIPs) such as repairing roads, building wells, or rehabilitating schools. These projects looked like classic humanitarian or early-recovery activities, targeting internally displaced populations and vulnerable communities but were also used to win hearts and minds and, at times, to gather local intelligence for security operations.

As a result, communities began to associate visible aid projects with military and political agendas. When villagers rejected a MINUSMA-built well because they opposed the mission's security role, the same suspicion often extended to neutral actors like the Red Cross or local NGOs. In some areas, the line-blurring became so severe that humanitarian organizations lost access, not because of their own behavior, but because they were perceived as part of the same apparatus. Mali shows how efforts to bundle stabilization and humanitarian tasks can erode the trust-based relationships

that make the humanitarian space possible in the first place.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MULTILATERALISM?

These tensions are not aberrations, but reflections of how the multilateral order is negotiated in practice. Humanitarian space becomes one of the theaters where broader geopolitical and institutional disagreements are worked out. Multilateralism, in this view, is less about eliminating disagreement and more about managing it through procedures, coordination mechanisms, and reporting practices that can themselves become sites of competition. Recognizing this is a first step toward more honest debates about the trade-offs between neutrality and stabilization, between local agency and donor control, and between short-term visibility and long-term trust.

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Email: info@fikerinstitute.org