

GSDM Symposium “Humanitarian crises and COVID-19”

Session 1: “*Confronting humanitarian crises in a global pandemic*”

Date: October 11th, 2021, 6-7.45 pm. | **Participants:** 18 people.

Organisers: Max Berthet & Saeko Kawataki (GSDM Student Committee).

Supporting members: Koutarou Nakamura (facilitator), Haruhisa Yamamoto (note-taker).



This document summarises the proceedings of Session 1 of the GSDM Symposium “Humanitarian crises and COVID-19”. Author: Haruhisa Yamamoto.

1. Introduction

- Side effects of pandemic: crises from humanitarian perspective.
- Definition of “humanitarian”: broad scope, focus on welfare.
- Symposium structure: problem setting -> current solutions -> future prospects.

2. Keynote speech: Dr. Albert Ko, Lingnan University

Background

- Mechanical engineering, robotics, and AI (e.g., disaster relief robots, modular robots).
 - Disaster relief organisations (e.g., Red Cross, MSF).
 - Work in university to combine the two experiences of disaster relief in humanitarian organisations and expertise in engineering.

Humanitarian technology

- Apply mature technology (technology that is already everywhere, very low cost, very easy to maintain) in an innovative way:
 - To help people to improve their living (e.g., reduce suffering, improve welfare and quality of life).
 - To preserve dignity of the person, which defines the humanitarian spirit.

Project 1. Transparent mask

- Help hearing impaired people: protect them against COVID-19 and allow them to read lips and communicate with others. Only works if the majority of non-hearing-impaired people use them.
- 7 million people live in Hong Kong, and around 120,000 of these have a hearing impairment.
- Challenges: reflection, fogging, moving of faces.

- Mature technology: use of existing filter (HEPA filter), with low-cost, low-reflection material.
- Inclusiveness:
 - Change of attachment method that allows people with microtia or people with head scarf to wear the mask.
 - Make it fashionable so that everyone, not only hearing impaired, will also use the same mask and communicate more easily with people with hearing difficulties.
 - Product not marketed as “a mask that helps disadvantaged people”, but rather as a fashionable item. Preserve dignity: do not advertise the mask by explaining the project background nor appealing to morality.

Project 2. Portable UV-C system

- Help people in sub-divided units (cheap but very narrow rooms) to improve their hygiene against COVID-19.
- Mature technology: UV-C used in hospitals.
- Innovativeness: make the machine portable.
- Not only a technology project, but also a humanitarian project: organise and train volunteers.

3. Interactive Q&A

Side effects of pandemic: depression, domestic violence, refugee, vaccine access, malnutrition.

4. Discussant speech: Dr. Roberto Orsi, The University of Tokyo, GraSPP

Humanitarianism is closely related not only to international politics/relations but also to the development of technology which has enabled various types of humanitarian activities.

History

- Humanitarianism is related particularly to war which causes large-scale human suffering.
- Organised movements to reduce suffering of soldiers: Dunant, Geneva Convention, Red Cross.
- Before WW2: organised on national basis -> After WW2: organised more on non-state, international basis & universalism principle (help humans as humans, any nationality or group).
- After Cold War: expansion of humanitarian activities (conflict + disaster, etc.).

Reasons for the expansion

- Entry of people and organisations preparing for conflicts during Cold War -> More involvement of states/state-backed organisations.
- Peer pressure between states to provide resources for humanitarian activities (e.g., providing vaccines to the Global South).
- Never-ending expansion of (political) complexity and resources in humanitarian organisations.
- Proliferation of humanitarian crises: increase in world population, long-term humanitarian

crises (e.g., Somalia, Yemen).

- Technological progress: Increase of information sharing, expansion of humanitarianism into areas that did not exist before.

Idea of humanitarianism

- Classic view (Dunantist): no political spill-over (neutral).
- New view (Wilsonian):
 - Often desirable to transform political structures in order to liberate individuals, produce peace and progress by attacking the root causes that lead population to risks.
 - Humanitarian crises being the norm (new normal, permanent, part of the structure) instead of the exception (something that happens sometimes).
 - Acceleration of political interventions -> Risks of being political/military targets, not humble but powerful organisations, seen as agents of cultural colonisation.

Challenges

- Unintended consequences (side effects) of technology-based salvation.
- Shifting nature of suffering (e.g., physical problems to psychological problems).
- Moving problems instead of solving problems (e.g, geographical movements of refugees).
- “Thick” form (humans as humans) or “thin” form of universalism.
- Contradiction between state-based beliefs and interventions in different states.

5. Q&A

Dr. Ko

- Balance of maturity and novelty: balance of risks and benefits of users.
- UV-C light effectiveness: not 100%.

Dr. Orsi

- How to keep focus on crises?
 - Difficult (people psychologically want to forget things).
 - Political leaders or other representatives should keep better prepared for crises.
- How to convince people to invest into preventing suffering rather than alleviating suffering?
 - Often there are disincentives for investing in prevention side, in politics: Solving visible crises makes political heroes.
 - Need for more mature political conversations: Educate population to understand complex policies and solutions, and to expect complex policies.
 - Emotions and impressions vs. rational and complex arguments.

Both

- How to bridge the gap between technology and policy, via education?
 - Dr. Ko



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- Nurture a generation that is willing and has the capacity to work with different disciplines, rather than specialists in one major field.
 - Emphasise ability to “solve X problem” rather than being “specialist in X field”.
- Dr. Orsi
- Capability to come up with ideas of social implications of one’s research and how it is located in social discussions.
 - Critical thinking: precise understanding of limitations of a given perspective, and how to transcend limitations by adjusting frame of reference.