

Interview – Daniela Nascimento

Written by E-International Relations

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Daniela Nascimento has a PhD in International Politics and Conflict Resolution and a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from the University of Coimbra, and a Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation from the Inter-European Center for Human Rights and Democratisation. She is a Researcher at the Peace Studies Group of the Center for Social Studies and Professor at the International Relations Group at the School of Economics of the University of Coimbra. Her research interests focus on peace studies, human rights, peacebuilding, and humanitarian action, especially in the African context and Timor-Leste. She has published various chapters and peer-reviewed articles in national and international journals and books. Amongst her more recent publications are the books *International Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Strategies. The Complexities of war and peace in the Sudans* (Routledge, 2017), and the co-edited *EU Global Actorness in a World of Contested Leadership: Policies, Instruments and Perceptions* (Palgrave Macmillan/Springer, 2020), including a chapter on 'Securing peace through humanitarian action: The EU response to complex emergencies'.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I personally feel that the field of International Relations is exciting at various levels and domains, and that there are plenty of debates and research areas that are particularly interesting. Nevertheless, I would refer to all critical debates regarding peace and conflict studies (including humanitarianism and human rights), post-colonialism and environmental issues. These are, in my view, the ones that pose the most challenges to how we approach international reality in all its complexity, and which may have a concrete impact in terms of policies, behaviours and action. I also believe that there is a responsibility from all of us who research and work in this field to be able to contribute to the transformation of the reality around us, not simply interpret or analyse it.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I started working in International Relations as an undergraduate student back in 1997 and now as a researcher and professor, and so it comes as only natural that my understanding of the world has changed over time and that I have been influenced by many events and people. It is also very clear that, having finished my BA in 2001, the 9/11 events have significantly impacted my views about the world and the main challenges that arose. The changes that resulted in terms of the international security agenda were definitely decisive in terms of contributing to the development of my critical stance towards reality (again in a transformational way).

A reference should also be made to the current events we are all currently living. The war in Ukraine after Russia's aggression on 24 February has made us all reflect and question our assumptions and understandings about the world's dynamics and structures at all levels: in terms of peace and security architectures, about the role of international organizations, about the validity of fundamental international principles – such as sovereignty, use of force, integrity of borders – and in terms of the world order that can result from this new war in Europe that is challenging the whole world.

How do you define 'new humanitarianism'?

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‘New humanitarianism’ is an approach to humanitarian action based on long-term objectives that aim at transforming and overcoming the more structural causes of human distress, and go beyond the more traditional goal of saving human lives from man-made crises, such as violent conflict. It is overtly political and politicized, which means that decisions on where to provide humanitarian aid and to whom ultimately depend on political decisions and on the long-term impact of those actions. It differs radically from the classical approach to humanitarianism in the sense that it no longer responds to, or is sustained by, fundamental principles of humanity and impartiality (towards the victims of humanitarian crises), or independence and neutrality (towards the belligerent parts). It thus poses significant challenges to humanitarian organizations and actors as these are called up to choose, select and adapt their action based on these new and adjusted principles.

It must be noted that the ‘new humanitarianism’ was the result of an intense debate on the implications and validity of the classical principles in renewed and significantly more complex violence settings – mostly internal – resulting in and perpetuating humanitarian crises. In particular, the principle of neutrality became somehow unsustainable in the face of situations where the belligerent parties were deliberately committing atrocities and contributing to human distress and human rights violations, posing significant ethical and moral dilemmas to humanitarian workers who could not, according to the principle, discriminate among victims nor take sides.

In your article, you explain how new humanitarianism has been increasingly taking over a more traditional form of humanitarianism based on principles of impartiality and neutrality. Is it plausible that this trend could be reversed, and would that be a desirable development?

I personally do not believe it would be possible to revert this trend at this point, especially given the high polarization of both the debate and the reality, even in the face of the many questionable impacts and results achieved by the new humanitarianism. I should also mention that the new humanitarianism raised many important questions and is, in theory, grounded in some pertinent and valuable assumptions in the sense that it does make us think more deeply about the place and role of humanitarianism and humanitarian actors in the field.

Still, I think that the many new ethical dilemmas it has raised and contributed to due to its high politicization, instrumentalization, militarization and consequentialist ethics, have undermined its potentially positive impact both in terms of the lives of the victims and the organizations themselves. Also, it has failed to accomplish the expected objectives as we have not seen, in the past decades, a decrease in violent conflicts and resulting humanitarian crises, nor has the international community as whole succeeded in tackling the root causes of that violence and humanitarian distress. On the contrary, we are increasingly faced with harsh, perpetuating and durable violence dynamics and crises, some of them now of a new nature, if we consider the humanitarian crisis in Madagascar (considered the first acute famine crisis solely resulting from climate change).

In my view, the desirable development in this field would be to effectively stop and think about what is – or should be – the fundamental role of humanitarian aid and organizations in such complex scenarios, without putting the burden of solving conflicts and promoting peace on them. That should be, at least, a shared responsibility with other relevant actors in the international system, and it requires clear and active political will. One lesson that I think we have learnt from the implementation of the new humanitarianism agenda in the past decades is that a humanitarian agenda should never be confused with political or security agenda aimed at pursuing higher political goals that ultimately compromise human lives.

In what ways has humanitarian aid fuelled conflict in Afghanistan over the years, and how could this effect be prevented or mitigated?

Afghanistan has been a very interesting and somehow paradigmatic example of how humanitarian aid has been conceived and implemented. It was also a case-study for the new humanitarianism. At the end of the 1990s, we all witnessed how human rights conditionality imposed on the Taliban regime by the international donor community, using humanitarian aid as a bargaining chip, had such a negative impact on the already existing humanitarian crisis. Organizations working in the country were pressured to suspend their activities due to the lack of response by the Taliban to the conditions that were imposed. Thus we can’t ignore the extent to which it aggravated the crisis.

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It also shows that pushing forward a political agenda sustained on humanitarian structures can be perverse and counterproductive in the absence of a more rigorous reading of the reality in front of us. With the American intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, as a self-defence act after the events of 9/11, we also witnessed the most negative consequences of the militarization of humanitarian action. The campaign based on conquering the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan population involved calling upon the same military forces to simultaneously perform a military campaign against the Taliban (often with the bombing of civilians due to the difficulties in distinguishing between terrorists and civilians) and a humanitarian campaign that was pursued through the dropping of food bags.

This inevitably resulted in misleading perceptions about who is doing what and for what purpose, including humanitarian organizations working independently on the ground but who were often associated with the intervention's broader goals, including the fall of the Taliban regime. Again, we can see how humanitarianism has been somehow co-opted by political and military objectives. This should and could have been prevented, giving humanitarian organizations enough space to perform their work without being pressured. The same happened a few years later in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion which resulted in violent attacks on the headquarters of both the ICRC and the UN mission.

Do you think current humanitarian engagement in Ukraine is drawing from lessons of the past, and if so in what ways?

The current humanitarian response and engagement in Ukraine are very much aligned with traditional approaches to humanitarian action: providing assistance to refugees, dealing with the complexity of the situation in the field when trying to respond to the needs of those displaced and to which access has been recurrently very difficult. We have all seen how the humanitarian crisis has been unravelling and how organizations have struggled to act. Take the example of the Red Cross, systematically unable to work and assist people in so many of the besieged cities due to the lack of security conditions for them; all the setbacks every time humanitarian corridors are agreed upon and then end up not being possible. The challenges are also in terms of how to deal and respond to the war crimes that are being committed and that result from disrespect of basic international humanitarian law regulations and principles. All of that poses significant challenges to humanitarian action in Ukraine. I honestly do not see a way to move beyond that in this case.

A note should be made in relation to how neighbouring countries are dealing and responding to the refugee flows of all those millions of people fleeing from Ukraine. In that case, I do see a significant shift, especially when it comes to countries such as Hungary or Poland: from totally closed borders to refugees fleeing from Syria, Libya and sub-Saharan countries and conflicts, to open doors to Ukrainians, even including flexible instruments to accelerate these processes (temporary protection mechanisms, for instance). That is very positive and, to my understanding, that is how states and governments should respond to human displacement, regardless of its origin. I hope European countries can draw the right lessons from this dramatic experience we are all faced with.

Overall, are the objectives and processes of relief and humanitarian assistance consistent or irreconcilable with those of long-term peacebuilding?

I do not think these are irreconcilable goals, as I believe they can and should be planned as complementary efforts and goals. The one thing I do not agree with is the view that short-term relief and humanitarian aid should be replaced with medium and longer-term objectives of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. There is space for all to have an important and positive impact and role in crises-related settings. What is necessary is clarity in terms of defining and agreeing upon their respective limits.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Be true to yourselves and to the principles you abide by, be passionate about it and always reflect that in your work, in a sustained and balanced way. And be prepared to work hard! It is a demanding, often stressful and difficult job, but it is also very rewarding.

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