Humanitarian Emergency and Response: A Conceptual Literature Review

Michael J. Denis, PhD
Department of Political Science
College of Education, Afaha Nsit, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria
mikelodudu@gmail.com

Otuekong V. Akpan
Department of International Relations and Diplomatic Studies
Ave-Maria University, Piyanko, Abuja, FCT, Nigeria
eyenvalens@gmail.com
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Abstract

This work is a qualitative research aimed at reviewing the concept of humanitarian emergency and other key concepts related to it. By analyzing available information and views on the given concept, the study found out that despite the numerous concrete cases of deaths, displacements, diseases, conflicts and other forms of suffering around the world, the concept of humanitarian emergency has not been given an adequate attention or wide publicity by scholars so as to translate its understanding into policies for mitigating these occurrences. Hence, the study recommended that the threat to, or loss of even one life through man-made or natural disaster should at every point be considered a case of emergency; that short-term and long-term approaches must complement each other for effective prevention of emergencies; that relief services should not be politicized and that the different humanitarian actors especially the military must learn to shun all forms of abuses.

Keywords: Emergency, Humanitarian, Prevention, Long-term, Relief

1. Introduction

The concept of humanitarian emergency is not common among local literatures. Much of the discussions on this concept are done by the different United Nations agencies that concern themselves with it. However, the basic causes, effects and challenges of humanitarian emergency are manufactured and consumed more locally, in particular contexts. It is based on the fact that this concept has been rarely discussed that the public seem to lack the proper knowledge of what constitutes humanitarian emergency, when it occurs and when to call for help. This paper therefore sets out to undertake a holistic study of the concept of humanitarian emergency based on the views and understanding of various scholars and experts on this subject matter.

The study examines different attempts at defining the concept, the types of humanitarian emergency, identifies complex humanitarian emergencies and the causes of humanitarian emergency which will include the economic and political factors on one hand and identity on the other hand. The study also investigates the dynamics of humanitarian emergency response which is considered in terms of short term and long term preventions. An examination of humanitarian agents and policies based on the contributions of civilians, the military and politics is also considered. Based on these, the study offers some recommendations and possible areas of further research in relation to the concept of humanitarian emergency.

2. Concept of Humanitarian Emergency

Väyrynen (1996) in Harff and Gurr (1998) defines humanitarian emergency (HE) as a profound social crisis in which a large number of people suffer or die from war, disease, hunger and displacement owing to man-made or natural disasters, while it may be profitable to others. Holsti (1997) observes that disease and hunger often prevail alongside armed violence and displacement as the common denominators of HE, but argues that independent of the later, the former are not sufficient conditions for HE. They further aver that the concept of HE is a social construct designed to deal with only a limited range of phenomena. Consequently, the numbers killed or at risk do not seem to be the prime criterion for qualification as a HE but massive killings and refugee flows have often been dubbed a HE only when it reaches the stage of an international community intervention.

3. Types of Humanitarian Emergency

HE has been classified into three types, namely natural disaster emergencies, man-made emergencies and complex emergencies. Natural disaster emergency may occur as a result of earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes, drought, outbreaks of disease etc. Man-made emergencies are caused by armed conflict, environmental degradation and major industrial hazards. Consequently, a combination of both natural disasters and man-made factors results to Complex Humanitarian Emergencies (CHEs) which involves large-scale violence and death, displacement, loss of property and economic decline. Hence, lack of infrastructure, poverty and climate change are some key factors that often catapult HEs to a complex nature. Hence, a crisis becomes complex if it has multiple causes and overlapping effects. It is often a disaster with social, economic and political dimensions which presents a context of fragility, vulnerability and uncertainties (Humanitarian Coalition, 2021). Fink and Stinson (2007) share a similar view that CHE refers to "a disaster that involves multiple components such as large-scale displacement of people in the context of conflict, war, persecution, economic crisis, terrorism, political instability or social unrest." McClelland, Adelski, Hill, Mason and Muscat (2000) also agrees with the above views, but adds that CHE only occurs as a result of armed conflicts or civil wars as distinct from natural disasters.

Väyrynen (1998) in Schmid (1998) considers four factors necessary to qualify an emergency situation as complex, namely, the fatalities from violence; the mortality of children under five years of age; the percentage of underweight children under five; and the number of external refugees and internally displaced persons. Similarly, according to the USAID's

Performance Report (1998) complex emergencies are marked out by armed conflict, death, displacement, hunger and injury. Hence, the concept could be summed up as a man-made crisis whereby large numbers of people die or suffer from war, physical violence or displacement (Väyrynen, 2000a in Nafziger, 2002a).

The essentials of these views are stated more comprehensively by the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR, 1996 in McClelland, Adelski, Hill, Mason, & Muscat, 2000) which remarks that complex emergencies tend to have multiple causes, but are essentially political in nature and entail violent conflict. They typically include a breakdown of legitimate institutions and governance, widespread suffering, massive population displacements and often involving a range of responses from the international community, including intense diplomacy and conflict resolution efforts, UN policing actions and the provision of multilateral and bilateral humanitarian assistance by official and private agencies. A complex emergency tends to be very dynamic and characterized by rapid changes that are difficult to predict. On a whole, what could be garnered from these different perspectives is a unanimity that CHE is "a disaster that comes at least in part due to human design" (Fink & Stinson, 2007).

4. Sources of Humanitarian Emergency
4.1 Economic and Political factors of CHE

However, Nafziger (2002a) points out both economic and political sources of CHE. They outline the economic elements as low per capita income, prolonged economic stagnation and resource control. The political structure comprises political exclusion, weak state and a culture of violence. Collier and Hoeffler (1998) share a similar view, positing that these economic elements include low per capita income, increased natural resources, large population size, and heterogeneous ethno-linguistic groups. This implies for them that poverty is the main source of HE because it leads to struggle for scarce resources. Green (1986) and Keen (2000) in Nafziger (2002a) aver that neither the sources nor the prevention of poverty can be separated from the sources and prevention of HE since widespread poverty is most often identified at the initial stages of HE, implying that the upsurge of emergency is merely a deepening of conflict and exploitation that has been latent. Väyrynen (2002) also pitches the causes of CHEs with economic factors. According to them, the domestic cause of HE is undemocratic and predatory governance leading to lack of socioeconomic development which is often characterized by "low average income, slow economic growth, and high income-inequality" (Nafziger, 2002b).

The economic sources of CHE as outlined by Nafziger (1996) in McClelland, Adelski, Hill, Mason, & Muscat, (2000) parallel those preceding. These include prolonged stagnation, unequal growth, population pressure on resources, distributional shifts owing to adjustment programs. However, they accept that,

> ethnicity (based on differences of language, race, tribe, religion, national origin, or some other cultural sense of identity) is the primary factor underlying a complex humanitarian emergency. [Albeit] by contrast, the economic model views complex humanitarian emergencies and ethnic conflict in the context of economic development and structural change. In this [economic] model, economic factors

are pivotal in shaping conflicts, though these conflicts may be triggered by political or ethnic causes. That is, economic factors create the conditions for ethnic or political explosions that in turn lead to complex emergencies (Nafziger (1996) in McClelland, Adelski, Hill, Mason, & Muscat, 2000).

4.2   Identity as a source of Humanitarian Emergency

Holsti (1997) takes lightly the economic conditions posited here as a necessary trigger of HE. He argues otherwise, that there are many states with low per capita incomes that have not experienced HEs. However, they agrees that HEs most often occur in societies that have heterogeneous ethnic identity, language or religion, and adds that societies with recent independence of not earlier than 1945, political exclusion or persecution of particular groups, minority rule and a weak governance are also vulnerable. For them, these political conditions, however, supersede the primordial identity thesis.

Most authors insist on the interaction between these political factors and other factors such as those of ethnic, religious and social context for CHE to occur. For instance, McClelland, Adelski, Hill, Mason and Muscat (2000) suggest predatory governance, ethnic and ideological differences as some causal factors of CHE while Brandt (1995) and Apthorpe (1997) in McClelland, Adelski, Hill, Mason, & Muscat (2000) insist that CHE are caused by wars or deep rooted conflicts within states which are often defined by ethnicity, religion or language. Hill (1997) point out economic crisis, religious and ethnic hegemony as the drivers of complex emergencies.

While Hoslti (1997) insists that "spontaneous outbreaks of ethnically-based violence are rare", he nevertheless reports that the end of the cold war experienced an unprecedented number and intensity of ethnic violence. Numerous analysts such as Ellingsen (1996) and Gurr (1993) agree that the intrastate wars that rose to its pick at the end of the cold war were downrightly primordial ethnic skirmishes due to the arbitrarily created colonial boundaries. It is also within this period that HE was said to be rife not as a result of other factors but the incessant conflicts (Väyrynen, 1996 & Gurr, 1996). Deducing from these claims, it would be difficult to totally rule out the issue of identity as a cause of CHEs. However, it would be more significant to consider that these post-colonial states were "fictions that have not yet been transformed into lasting political communities" (Holsti, 1997), leading to the politicization of ethnicity as the main cause of violence and emergencies.

5.0   Humanitarian Emergency Response

Humanitarian emergency response is a traditionally organized way of meeting the most immediate needs in emergencies. Lederach and Mansfield (2010) illustrates Humanitarian Emergency Response (HER) as an aspect of humanitarian action. HE experts, for instance, Väyrynen (1996) and Nafziger (2002a) opt for the use of the term 'prevention' as a substitute for 'response' in CHEs discussions. Reasons for this novel approach are not far-fetched because there is apparently just a subtle difference between the aims of prevention and response, at least functionally. For instance, Toye (2002) in Nafziger (2002a) argues that lack of basic services increases the risk of CHEs but, conversely, that improved health care, education, infrastructure and security enhances economic growth are potent means of guarding against rebellion and

conflict. In other words, we may understand the above to mean that the services rendered as response measures are basically what should have been in place if the emergency was to be prevented. Hence, every emergency response is also a means of prevention from escalation or future occurrences of HEs. Additionally, the essence of preventive measures would therefore go deep into addressing the root causes of potential conflicts through the detection of early warning signs.

5.1   Short Term and Long Term Preventions

Nafziger (2002b) distinguishes between short-term and long-term preventions of CHEs. Short-term prevention refers to "diplomatic or military operations or medium-term political or constitutional arrangements" while "long-term efforts include undertaking structural and institutional change, building capacity and spurring economic and political development". Short term efforts may help ameliorate potential conflict but may not address the underlying causes, while long term actions will give a more lasting effect and curtail future occurrences.

According to Nafziger (2002b) this long term policies must take into cognizance the political economy which includes not only economic approaches that address the root causes but also the interests of political leaders and economic decision makers as well as the population affected by these decisions. They recommend approaches that may increase economic growth and reduce poverty to include "stabilization, adjustment and reform; aid and debt relief; foreign investment; institutional change; safety nets for the poor; reduction of inequalities; and food and agriculture".

The correlates of the short term and long term policies are what Kleist (1994) in McClelland, Adelski, Hill, Mason and Muscat (2000) and Dunn (2013) term relief and rehabilitation respectively. While relief enables people to atleast stay alive in the conflict situation, rehabilitation aims at helping them regain livelihood. They posit that rehabilitation which is often through socio-economic development more dramatically has to do with addressing the issue that caused the humanitarian crisis. Väyrynen (2002) gives a tint of elaboration to this claims as they put forward that the key and most effectual preventive strategies to HEs are to give attention to the root causes which often has to do with socio-economic development, environmental protection, economic inequality and poverty, political exclusion, lack of accountability in the leadership structure and polity.

McClelland, Adelski, Hill, Mason and Muscat (2000) critically appraises the connection between these two approaches as they establish that there is no clear cut demarcation between this relief-rehabilitation continuum, since both must be integrative. They rather decry the fact that this relationship often exist conceptually and not in practical terms and especially since donors are at liberty of withdrawing services at any stage of the assistance. Reacting to this, Väyrynen (2002) observes that albeit both approaches need to be attentive to early warning signs, for success to be attained, effective implementation is also imperative. Consequently, Donini (2002) advances this argument emphatically, that short-term relief is simply a route to failure if development is not fundamentally integrated.

5.2   Selected Long-term Approaches

The indispensability of this later approach makes it clear why most scholars dwell on its analysis almost at the expense of the former. For instance, Berry (2002) recommends agrarian reform and land distribution as means of preventing HEs that may arise from conflicts over lands. For them, conflict of land disputes and unequal distribution of agricultural land is a major economic source of HEs, consequently paralleling "poor infrastructure, poor health and educational services and other variables that increase the probabilities of emergencies".

Kibreab (2002) argues that environmental protection is an indispensable part of HEs prevention strategies. Environmental degradation breeds vulnerability to potential HEs. Such emergencies are easily caused by famine, low yield due to over-cultivation, overgrazing, deforestation, siltation, water-logging and erosion. They maintain that protected environmental resources, though may not prevent natural or human induced disasters, may help mitigate the effects of crisis in order not to lead to CHEs. This is corroborated by Denis (2019a) who posits that "conflicts are bound to erupt when means of livelihood seem to fail without any mitigating efforts in sight".

Sandbrook (2002) strongly believes that strengthening of democratic institutions is a very effective means of preventing/responding to HEs especially in a heterogeneous society. They explore four distinct causes of CHEs namely environmental scarcity, rising communal tensions, an increasingly rapacious, venal and weak state and a declining economy with increased and severe poverty. Consequently, they opine that democratization could be an effective way of tackling these problems in order to curtail the risk of CHEs. According to them, democratization is a simple tool for institutional reforms which is enhanced by the constitution, freedom of civil society, spirit of patriotism, social infrastructure and history. Democratization, according to Väyrynen (2002) cannot be successful until local civil society resists every form of authoritarianism and takes responsibility of protecting its institutions.

Clapham (2002) notes that respect for human rights play a determinant role in preventing CHEs. For them, with a human rights consciousness an impending emergency can easily be detected. It can also make for easy resolution where crisis has already erupted. While so many scholars have glossed over it, Clapham insists that human rights principles are an integral part of emergency prevention or resolution. He remarks that human rights movement is a very important factor in CHEs prevention effort. Corroborating this view, Dunn (2013) observes that "increasingly, the arguments for humanitarian aid provision focus on the idea of human rights." Hence, humanitarian response though has been traditionally organized to meet the most immediate basic needs in emergencies, should extend this needs-based assistance to human rights defence within conflict situations.

While there is actually a sense of unanimity in these perspectives analyzed, Walden (2001) in Dunn (2013) argues otherwise that the role of humanitarian assistance in HEs is simply for the health and wellbeing of those displaced and not to address the political sources that lead to the problem. This dissenting position certainly limbs if HE is actually meant to be addressed holistically.

6.0   Humanitarian Agents and Policies

According to Nafziger (2002b) humanitarian emergency response includes a wide variety of actors and supporters namely government, indigenous civil society, international NGOs and agencies, the United Nations, OECD and IFIs governments, but the involvement of international agencies and nongovernmental organizations in humanitarian action is always necessitated only by weak or non-existent government structures in emergency situations (Lautze, Leaning, Raven-Roberts, Kent & Mazurana, 2004).

However, Väyrynen (2002), argues that international support and intervention is indispensable in domestic crisis, despite domestic policies, especially in situations where the leadership is itself the political source of emergency. Intervention of this nature is often legitimized by other international policies such as the need for human-rights monitoring, economic sanctions, statutory development aid to less developed countries, International Monetary Fund and World Bank policies aimed at economic growth, debt reduction and more access to the international markets. This need for policies is given a favourable consideration by Hveem (2002) who argues for policies that enhance effective response to HEs. They examine various actors and ways in which they are involved in policy-making, implementation, early warnings and willingness to assists in cases of HEs. For instance, whether major donors such as the European Union (EU), the US, Japan and Norway have a major stake in policy-making.

DeMars (2002) agrees with these preceding analysts that international agencies' role is crucial in conflict prevention but opines that their involvement and impact may be limited by access to information, their ability to analyze same and their motifs, some of which may be other than conflict prevention. Generally, however, their intervention fundamentally motivates and makes it cheaper for policy makers to effect policy reforms.

6.1   Military Interventions

Weiss (2002) examines the pros and cons of military interventions, specifically in situations where the military forces and civilian aid agents collaborate in response to HE. Hence they ask "is it possible and worthwhile to use the military in conjunction with humanitarian action to thwart violence and mitigate civilian suffering?" Albeit, this multilateral military involvement in humanitarian action may yield success, they conclude that there also abound unintended effects and as such collaborations often give rise to abuses leading to the civilians suffering more humanitarian tragedy even after the intervention.

6.2   Politics of Relief Services

Dunn (2013) exposes the challenges often faced by organizations operating in CHEs which include protection for aid providers, efforts to differentiate between the aggressors and the victims and the tendency of politicizing assistance. Domini (2002) reiterates that the role of relief services in peace operations can never be overemphasized though it is often predated upon by   political factors. This politics of relief efforts are everywhere and sometimes even protract human suffering (Holsti, 1997).

According to Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau (2010), one of the main obstacles to humanitarian emergency response is the humanitarian space, which generally refers to the amount of access to targets that aid providers have without aggressive or undue interference. McClelland, Adelski, Hill, Mason and Muscat (2000) claims that the developmental aspect of humanitarian assistance is very difficult in ongoing conflict situations since institutional breakdown also brings about political instability and physical insecurity which stiffen economic development.

7.0   Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of the concept of Humanitarian Emergency (HE) so far undertaken has revealed the vastness of its subject matter. The types of humanitarian emergency, factors or sources of humanitarian emergency, actors and the myriad of responses reviewed have helped to expose the different shades of this concept. There is however no clear unanimity either on the definition of the concept nor the other issues bordering on the causes and responses to humanitarian emergency. Albeit, these varied views when knitted together could has bring to bear a wholesome understanding of the concept.

However, the definition of humanitarian emergency by Väyrynen (1996) in Harff and Gurr (1998) as a crisis only involving the dead of a large number of persons could in different ways undermine the protection of human lives in situations of disaster. This is not far-fetched especially in Nigeria and other African countries where even when many people lose their lives through one form of man-made or natural disaster seem not to draw much attention of those meant to prevent or mitigate the situation. Every life matters as it could be obtainable in the western world where a state of emergency could be declared for a single case of murder. It is against the backdrop of these loopholes latent in the understanding of the concept of humanitarian emergency in the literatures reviewed that the following recommendations are made:

- The concept of humanitarian emergency as understood from available literature is highly a social construct. Hence, any life lost or the number killed in any disaster should be of prime importance rather than depend on some form of international intervention as a criterion or foundation for drastic response.
- Despite the contradictory views on the best approach to emergencies, majority of the scholars have established without doubt that that the long-term prevention is paramount but this can hardly be realized without addressing the immediate needs too.
- The literatures reviewed omitted the impact of humanitarian emergency on the society, hence, further studies on the concept of humanitarian emergency, should endeavour to explore its effect on the society especially where such an emergency has been inadequately addressed.
- Every short-term assistance or action in emergencies should be consolidated to bear lasting results. This can to a great extent determine the direction of later economic development. For instance, the immediate relief of food and medicals can gradually be followed by a building of productive infrastructure such as roads and irrigation, supply of household utensils, seeds and tools for agricultural purposes which will enable the victims to set up at least short-term jobs or subsistence farming and be less dependent while returning to their homes. Capacity building through a process of "self-development" (Denis, 2019b), which

involves the ability to transform ones environment through the acquisition of skills is also recommended especially to manage the post-conflict economic recovery process. Accordingly, this phase in HE management is at once preventive and precautionary and can be applied to prevent the reoccurrence of emergency or atleast minimize its impact if does occur.

- Relief services and humanitarian action by its nature and goal should never be politicized; else it may tantamount to self-delusion.
- The military is an integral part of humanitarian emergency response especially in high conflict situations by helping to narrow the humanitarian space, hence they should be professional at all times in order not to undermine their essence though abuses.

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