



Course information 2026-27

DV2162 Complex Emergencies and Humanitarian Responses

General information

MODULE LEVEL: 5

CREDIT: 30

NOTIONAL STUDY TIME: 300 hours

MODE: Locally Taught and Independent Learner Route Only (not available for Online Taught students)

Summary

This course provides a comprehensive exploration of humanitarianism, delving into its historical and social roots, the construction of humanitarian responses, and the complex causes of suffering. It examines the evolution of humanitarianism from its origins in faith and colonialism to its modern forms, analysing the influence of capitalism, conflict, and profound social change. The course also critically assesses how humanitarian crises are socially constructed and how media framing shapes responses to suffering.

Furthermore, the course investigates the legal and institutional frameworks governing humanitarian action, focusing on the refugee regime, international cooperation, and the role of organizations like the UNHCR. It explores the challenges of protracted crises, displacement, and the protection of vulnerable populations, including environmental refugees and those affected by famine and natural disasters. Finally, the course critically examines the humanitarian system itself, analyzing its critiques, reforms, and potential drivers of transformative change, such as faith, technology, and the increasing securitization of aid.

Conditions

Prerequisite: no other courses are proposed as a prerequisite for this course.

Aims and objectives

- To develop students' critical understanding of the historical, social, and political forces that shape humanitarianism and its responses to human suffering.

- To equip students with the analytical tools and theoretical frameworks necessary to examine the complex causes and consequences of humanitarian crises.
- To foster students' awareness of the ethical dilemmas and challenges inherent in humanitarian action and intervention.
- To encourage students to critically engage with contemporary humanitarian policies and debates, and to formulate informed perspectives on potential solutions and reforms.

Learning outcomes

At the end of this course and having completed the Essential reading and activities, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the historical evolution of humanitarianism, including its key actors, institutions, and driving forces.
- critically analyse the social, political, and economic factors that contribute to humanitarian crises, and evaluate the effectiveness of different response mechanisms.
- apply relevant theoretical frameworks, such as securitisation theory, gender analysis, and postcolonial critiques, to analyse contemporary humanitarian challenges.
- Explain the complex causes of humanitarian crises, including conflict, displacement, environmental factors, and development challenges.
- Synthesize knowledge from different perspectives to formulate critical arguments about the challenges and opportunities facing the humanitarian system.
- formulate evidence-based policy recommendations for addressing specific humanitarian issues, taking into account ethical considerations and the perspectives of diverse stakeholders.
- Communicate complex humanitarian issues effectively in written and oral formats, demonstrating clarity, evidence-based reasoning, and persuasive argumentation.

Employability skills

By the end of the course, and having completed the essential reading and activities, students should have developed the following skills:

1. Critical Thinking & Analysis: Students will be able to dissect complex information, identify biases, and form evidence-based arguments. This is crucial for roles requiring research, policy analysis, or strategic decision-making.
2. Cross-Cultural Awareness: The course's emphasis on historical and social contexts, including colonialism and diverse humanitarian actors, fosters sensitivity and understanding of different cultures, valuable in international work environments.
3. Communication (Written & Oral): Assignments like essays and presentations hone students' ability to articulate complex ideas clearly and persuasively, essential for reports, advocacy, or stakeholder engagement.
4. Research & Information Gathering: Analysing humanitarian crises necessitates strong research skills to gather and synthesize information from diverse sources, useful in any field requiring data analysis or knowledge management.

5. Problem-Solving: Understanding the root causes of crises and evaluating different responses equips students with the ability to identify problems, analyse solutions, and make informed decisions, crucial for many roles.
6. Ethical Reasoning & Decision-Making: The course's focus on ethical dilemmas in humanitarianism develops students' capacity to navigate complex moral situations and make responsible choices, highly valued in any sector.
7. Collaboration & Teamwork: Group projects or discussions on humanitarian responses foster collaboration and negotiation skills, essential in diverse workplaces.

Essential reading

- Bradley, M. (2023). *The Politics and Everyday Practice of International Humanitarianism*. Oxford University Press.
- Barnett, M. (2011) *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. Cornell University Press.
- Fassin, D. (2012). *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. University of California Press.
- Betts, A., & Collier, P. (2017). *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*. Penguin Random House.
- Sen, A. (1981). *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford University Press.
- Duffield, M. (2001). *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. Zed Books.

Assessment

This course is assessed by a 3 hour written examination.

Syllabus

Block 1: Historical & Social Roots of Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism has evolved alongside capitalism, war, and social transformation, shaping its moral and political foundations. The rise of 18th-century humanitarian institutions was deeply intertwined with faith, colonial expansion, and emerging global power structures. Understanding these historical roots helps contextualise contemporary humanitarian interventions and their enduring contradictions.

1. The Humanitarian 'Big Bang Theory' and Religious Explanations
2. The Role of Capitalism, Colonialism and Conflict In the Humanitarian 'Big Bang'.

Block 2: Exploring Vulnerabilities and Causes of Suffering

Humanitarian crises often stem from complex and interconnected root causes, including conflict, environmental degradation, and socio-economic inequalities. Theories of famine, displacement, and vulnerability illustrate how systemic failures, rather than mere scarcity, drive human suffering.

Addressing these root causes requires a nuanced understanding of the interplay between politics, development, and disaster response.

3. Socially Constructing Crises: Emergency and Humanitarian Imaginaries
4. The Media's Interaction with States and the Humanitarian System in Determining the Scale of the International response

Block 3: The Construction of Humanitarian Responses

Humanitarian crises are not just material realities but socially constructed events shaped by political and media narratives. The ways in which emergencies are framed influences public perception, funding priorities, and international responses. Examining these constructions reveals how suffering is selectively highlighted or ignored within the global humanitarian landscape.

5. Conflict and Displacement
6. Climate Change, Environment, Displacement and Humanitarian Protection
7. Famine Theories
8. Gender and Natural Disasters

Block 4: The Refugee Regime

The global refugee system is shaped by legal frameworks, international cooperation, and the politics of state sovereignty. While institutions like the UNHCR play a crucial role, refugee policies often reflect broader geopolitical interests, border securitisation, and shifting spatial dynamics. Understanding these mechanisms highlights both the protections and limitations within the refugee regime

9. International Co-Operation and Refugee Burden Sharing
10. The Refugee Regime and Global Governance
11. 'Environmental Refugees'?
12. Refugee Encampment
13. Protracted Crises and Durable Solutions

Block 5: Power, Politics, and Professionalization: Critiquing and Reforming the Humanitarian System

Global ideologies, technology, and security concerns continue to reshape humanitarian action in both promising and problematic ways. Innovations in aid delivery, digital tools, and securitisation policies influence how crises are managed and responded to. As humanitarian spaces evolve, the sector faces critical questions about its future direction and ethical responsibilities.

14. Humanitarianism as Governance and Governmentality
15. Critically Assessing the Reforms of the Humanitarian System
16. Human Rights and Humanitarianism
17. Technology and the Reform of Humanitarianism
18. Humanitarian Space and Humanitarian access
19. Humanitarian Securitisation

20. Armed Humanitarian Intervention