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Now is the time to deliver: looking for humanitarian innovation's theory of change

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Abstract

Since the publication of the ALNAP study on innovation in international humanitarian action in 2009, innovation has emerged as a central vehicle for change in the humanitarian sector. As the field of humanitarian innovation expands and matures, there is an increasingly vocal expectation that "now is the time to deliver." Navigating optimistic claims about the role and relevance of humanitarian innovation as a vehicle of change—and the reverse inclination to dismiss humanitarian innovation as a neoliberal hype—this review article sets out to get a better sense of the expectations concerning humanitarian innovation as a theory of change: exactly what do actors in the humanitarian sector expect innovation to deliver, how, and why does it matter?

Keywords: Humanitarian innovation, Theory of change, Effectiveness, ICT, Private sector, Market, Neoliberal, Power, Ethics

Introduction

Humanitarians have always innovated by trying to improve their programs, the quality of material objects, or the approaches through which aid, care, and protection are delivered. However, since the publication of the ALNAP study on innovation in international humanitarian action in 2009, innovation has emerged as a central vehicle for change in the humanitarian sector. Quickly attaining the status of a buzzword, the mention of "humanitarian innovation" in donor speeches, policy documents, and media coverage has proliferated, and United Nations (UN) agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and philanthropic foundation and donors have launched labs, funding schemes, and hubs on humanitarian innovation. In 2016, innovation was designated as one of the main themes for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS); that same year, the UN Agenda for Humanity stated that to deliver collective outcomes, the humanitarian sector must focus strongly on innovation (UN 2016). As the field of humanitarian innovation expands and matures, there is an increasingly vocal expectation that "now is the time to deliver."

A growing number of studies have mapped the "ecosystem" of humanitarian innovation (DFID 2012; IFRC 2013; Bloom and Betts 2013; Bessant et al. 2014; Betts et al. 2015; Ramalingam et al. 2015; Deloitte 2015; Obrecht 2017).

These studies focus on new technologies, processes, and approaches for improving humanitarian aid; they address funding, budgeting, and institutional support and explore the challenges of developing good use cases and evidence-based practices and the difficulty of bringing innovations to scale. A common feature of these contributions is that they espouse significant, perhaps utopian expectations of what innovation can do for humanitarian action. This tendency makes closer academic scrutiny highly pertinent. Yet, an opposite claim, that humanitarian innovation is a buzzword with no impact on the sector, would be highly misleading. The humanitarian innovation agenda, its projects, stakeholders, and visions of improvement for the humanitarian sector *do things*. How the humanitarian innovation discourse contemplates change says much about power, resource distribution, and humanitarian governance. While there are flourishing bodies of critical scholarship on "humanitarian technology" and "humanitarian objects" (Jacobsen 2010; Redfield 2016; Schwittay 2014; Cross and Street 2009; Scott-Smith 2013; Abdelnour and Saeed 2014; Sandvik 2016a; Sandvik and Lohne 2014), critical scholarly analysis of the making of the humanitarian innovation agenda, the rapid institutionalization of the field, and the everyday practices of humanitarian innovation is only emerging (Sandvik 2013; Sandvik 2014; Sandvik et al. 2014; Scott-Smith 2016; Agathangelou 2017). Navigating optimistic claims about the role and relevance of humanitarian innovation as a vehicle of change—and the reverse

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inclination to dismiss humanitarian innovation as a neo-liberal hype—this review article sets out to get a better sense of the expectations concerning humanitarian innovation as a theory of change: exactly what do stakeholders in the humanitarian sector expect innovation to deliver, how, and why does it matter?

Some caveats are in order: There is a blossoming trade in publications, reports, and conferences discussing means and ends *inside* the field of humanitarian innovation. The audience for this article is the *broader* academic community interested in humanitarian affairs and, more specifically, in critical appraisals of the humanitarian innovation field. Any critique of the humanitarian innovation field is bound to be partial and incomplete and shaped by the author's positionality as an academic commentator and/or practitioner within or outside the field. This article represents one view. This article uses the idea of a theory of change as an analytical device: it does not aim to engage with or evaluate any one explicitly or implicitly articulated theory of change; at present, no theory of change has achieved particular prominence, and the field has a decidedly ambiguous relationship to such theories.[1] While the relationship between the humanitarian innovation agenda and general innovation theory is an important point of inquiry, it is beyond the scope of this article. Finally, by necessity, this review takes a deliberatively *narrow* view of the audience imagined for the question of what humanitarian innovation should or could deliver, focusing on the humanitarian sector professionals broadly construed (policy-makers, donors, practitioners, and academics).

In cobbling together the pieces of the humanitarian innovation fields theory of change, the article proceeds in four steps: It starts by framing a humanitarian critique of humanitarian innovation. Then, the article puts forward what it sees as the fields general hypothesis of change, emphasizing the roles of the private sector and technological innovation. In the third part, the article explores the assumptions underlying this dual hypothesis. Finally, the article surveys the interplay between ideas and "messy social interactions" in the humanitarian innovation field to contemplate the notion of change as a matter of *degree*. A brief conclusion follows.

Framing a humanitarian critique

The humanitarian innovation literature often talks about successful innovations as those that are adopted and those that manage to "scale," resulting in sustainable commercial revenue models. In gauging the potential impact of humanitarian innovation as a vehicle for institutional, cultural, and social change, there are several ways in which one could imagine success: as a transformative, ideational realization of the humanitarian imperative of succoring need; as a mode of re-making the sector "fit for purpose" by removing internal barriers

and negotiating external barriers in a better way; or more modestly as a technical fix that could improve aspects of aid and aid provision. Analytically, the actual realization of each of these visions of outcome could be investigated further through assessments of market viability or analysis of practice.

However, without a critical frame attentive to the power and governance dimensions of humanitarian innovation, this type of analysis might amount to little more than a traditional gap analysis of the negative inadvertent consequences of ideals, plans, and intentions in the global emergency field, where commentators judge humanitarians for being instrumentalized by politics, capitalism, or other and for "not living up to their own normative goals while taking those goals for granted" (Dijkzeul 2015:263).[2] The urgency of providing a critical perspective is exacerbated by the fact that something relatively unique has happened in a sector that endemically blames the lack of precise or commonly agreed definitions for failure: the work of Bessant and Tidd (2007)—which focuses on products, processes, positions, and paradigms—has achieved seemingly uncontested status as the principal reference point for what innovation "is."[3] Critics have suggested that this clarity engenders an analytical slipperiness, noting "the difficulty of picking apart the stakes of humanitarian innovation is largely a result of the scale of the "four Ps"... how could anyone object to such an inclusive and ambitious reform agenda?" (Scott-Smith 2016:2231). To frame its humanitarian critique, the article takes the following methodological considerations as its point of departure: first, the article looks to Dijkzeuls (2015) idea of dynamic adaption: global humanitarian action takes place in a set of interconnected humanitarian arenas, where actors negotiate the outcomes of aid. Paraphrasing Dijkzeul, the article understands aid—or in this case, innovation— to be "the outcome of the messy interaction of social actors struggling, negotiating and at times guessing to further their interests" (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010).

Second, the article situates the humanitarian innovation field within a specific temporal trajectory, and thus, also within a specific critical, academic trajectory: Rights-based approaches, institutional reform thinking, and innovation theory all give rise to different worldviews and strategies (Vogel 2012). Over time, the humanitarian sector has turned to several such theories of change to professionalize as a sector and to meet the needs of communities in crisis in a better way (Binder et al. 2013; Sandvik 2016a and 2016b).

Third, humanitarian innovation is frequently both described and decried as a buzzword. However, there is a difference between these empirical claims and a critical analytical engagement with humanitarian innovation as a buzzword. This article understands buzzwords and political economy considerations to play important roles

in such theories of change, but they *are not* theories in themselves. As Cornwall and Brock (2005) explain, buzzwords lend the legitimacy that aid actors need to justify their interventions. Buzzwords frame problems by distinguishing some aspects of a situation from others—and in so doing, define paths of action. Buzzwords are used to create problem statements that inherently call for certain kinds of solutions (Cornwall and Brock 2005). Successful buzzwords engender institutional consequences: A political economy perspective allows for paying attention to how issues travel from being "forgotten" or "ignored" to becoming an industry that appropriates funding at the expense of attention and resources to other humanitarian needs and problems, including addressing root causes (Dijkzeul 2015).

Finally, to develop a critical understanding of how technological optimism as a hypothesis of change shape expectations about what humanitarian innovation is expected to deliver, this article adopts the view that scrutiny must be paid to how the diffusion of these innovations across the sector "generates new political settlements," which, in themselves constitute forms of institutional power (Herrera 2003) and warrant close academic scrutiny.

Hypothesis for change

The humanitarian sector is at present permeated by the notion that 'maintaining the status quo is no longer an option. . . . humanitarian tools and services are, in many cases, not suitable for modern emergencies' (WHS 2014:2). This has resulted in an unprecedented, sector-wide concern with *change*: that humanitarianism must change to stay relevant and that "humanitarian agencies need to become more innovative simply to maintain their relevance" (Ramalingam et al. 2009:9). This article suggests that the predominant feature of humanitarian innovation, amounting to its key hypothesis for change, and which markedly distinguishes it from previous influential theories, is the firm turn towards the market and new technology as catalysts for change and improvement in the humanitarian field. While "technology" and "the private sector" have both been constant entities in the humanitarian sector, this turn represents something qualitatively new.

Traditionally, a stigma has been attached to the notion of involving commercial actors in humanitarian action. And according to early observers of the humanitarian innovation field, many humanitarian practitioners viewed innovation as a private sector practice that was remote from the challenges of emergency response (White 2008 cited in Ramalingam et al. 2009). More recently, perspectives on the relationship between the business and humanitarian sector have changed drastically, and it is commonplace to argue—as OXHIP has—that *business increasingly plays a central role within humanitarianism, including through philanthropy, corporate social responsibility, innovation,*

and core business activities. It directly and indirectly shapes humanitarian assistance at global, national, and local levels (OXHIP 2015). This article seeks to interrogate the assumptions underlying this hypothesis of private sector as a key vehicle for change.

The second aspect of this hypothesis on change concerns the transformative potential of technology. The past two decades have witnessed non-governmental organizations, international agencies, governments, and private sector actors designing, adopting, and employing information communication technologies (ICTs) including smartphone apps, remote sensing platforms such as satellite imagery analysis, surveillance drones, and other forms of digital data collection and analytics, as standard components of sectoral and cross-sectoral responses. Technology is dramatically changing the way aid agencies provide assistance, from experimenting with blockchain technology to provide cash transfers to the use of biometrics to register and track beneficiary assistance through iris scans and fingerprinting (Sandvik and Raymond 2017). This has engendered a technological optimism (Sandvik et al. 2014) where the humanitarian technological innovation discourse construes problems in a way that make them amenable to "technological solutions" (Jacobsen 2015). It should also be noted that field is already engaging in a meta-conversation about this infatuation: While many view technology as a prime enabler (Bessant et al. 2014), observers warn against attributing inherently transformative qualities to technology—that is, creating situations in which "the technology itself consumes the focus of short-term projects" (Bloom 2014). Similar cautions have been made against fetishizing "newness": "novelty should not be seen as good in itself, rather innovations need to be judged on the basis of their contributions to improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, quality, or social outcomes" (Ramalingam et al. 2009).

Assumptions

Assumptions can be broadly understood as propositions that are taken for granted or accepted as true without reference to facts or proof. Assumptions represent the values, beliefs, norms, and ideological perspectives that inform the interpretations of the humanitarian innovation agenda and its projects (Vogel 2012). They range from ideas about the context, ideas about the drivers of change, ideas about the cause-effect relationships between interventions, outcomes and context, as well as individual and organizational values. The idea here is to identify and discuss some of the assumptions underlying the hypothesis for change. The following sections focus particularly on assumptions about (1) the state of the problems humanitarian innovation field seeks to solve and (2) the internal problems the humanitarian innovation field grapples with. This includes assumptions concerning the long-term change (market inclusion) that the humanitarian innovation field seeks to support and

for whose ultimate benefit, how processes within the humanitarian innovation field will lead to the desired outcome, and assumptions about how these changes may happen (see Vogel 2012).

Shifting problem definitions

According to a deeply held assumption across the sector, the imperative of assisting according to need sits at the ideational core of humanitarianism, and thus also provides the sector with its central problem definition. All humanitarian activities must ultimately be justified and judged in terms of its impact on alleviating suffering. Emerging from the new emphasis on change and the reconfiguration of solutions as being embedded in the private sector, an initial humanitarian innovation problem definition pertained to the *absence* of structured innovation thinking and institutional clout. However, over the past couple of years, major UN humanitarian organizations and donors have launched dedicated innovation hubs and funding schemes[4] and supported other entities including the Humanitarian Innovation Fund, the Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation, the Global Humanitarian Lab, the Global Innovation Exchange, and many others.

As observed by Dijkzeul (2015) in the case of gender-based violence (GBV), when GBV "became a growth market, other international land local organizations entered to gain funding. Some of the 'new' organizations did not notice that several organizational networks already existed." At some point, donors came under pressure to redistribute funds from the GBV budgets they had created but were met with resistance from organizations and staff members benefitting from high funding levels and the international recognition of the issue. A similar dynamic is now emerging in the humanitarian innovation field. This has recently (from around 2015) led to a reconfiguration of the key problem of humanitarian innovation as an inability to scale. As noted by McClure and Gray (2015),

> there has been "increasingly disgruntled talk of 'pilottitus', the proliferation of small programs that are stuck and unable to scale up. For the moment, investments continue, growing the pool of unfulfilled pilot programs. We have referred to this phenomena as 'breeding baby bunnies', and over the last 18 months have seen it as a growing crisis, denying the benefits of innovations to affected populations and undermining the faith of donors in the innovation agenda." (McClure and Gray 2015).

In response, considerable effort is being given to improve the innovation process itself—what McClure and Gray (2015) calls "the missing middle"—though combined with an explicit recognition that the variance in funding models between public money, and capital requiring innovation models focused on revenue, makes a structural difference. Hence, the key problem definitions appear to be shifting from a political vision of fixing humanitarianism to a more introvert, technical concern with "fixing itself." Attention must now be paid to how the turn inwards and the increasing competition for donor attention shape visions of outcome.

What is "new"

As observed by Lohne and Sandvik (2017) and Scott-Smith (2016), it is the task of critical scholarship to look for assumptions regarding what is new, with respect to the claims of newness in itself, and in terms of the values, logics and priorities espoused by this agenda for change. Within this schema, the sectors *own* exchanges on newness (as illustrated by the exchange on technology, above) and what it says about change must be subjected to scrutiny. While "innovation" and private sector engagements date back to the early days of Western humanitarianism, there has been a substantial shift in language over the past decade. There has been a considerable rhetorical shift in how private-public collaborations are talked about and the values that motivate and/or should be the objective of these collaborations. A notable feature of this shift is the changing monikers for describing aid recipients (from victims to beneficiaries to customers) and the emerging new status of "effectiveness" as a central principle in humanitarian action.

The 2008 "Guiding Principles for Public-Private Collaboration for Humanitarian Action" issued by OCHA and the World Economic Forum (pinpointing the rise of the private sector "turn" to 2005) does not contain the words effectiveness, efficiency, or "innovation." Instead, the focus is on "communicating key humanitarian principles as well as integrating elements of lessons learnt from previous private sector engagement." The appropriate objective of partnerships is described as "the shared goal of alleviation of human suffering and provision of quality assistance to those most in need." The principles emphasize that "their collaborative efforts with the humanitarian community to alleviate human suffering should not be used for commercial gain" (WEF and OCHA 2008). By 2013, the rhetoric had changed substantially: An OXFAM and WFP brief on "engaging the markets in humanitarian responses" (Henderson et al. 2013) explains that "Out of consideration for 'do no harm' and efficiency principles, humanitarians have increasingly invested in market analysis in recent years." The brief suggests that a "combination of targeted support to market actors, and provision of market-integrated relief, is expected to contribute to the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions" and finally that "there is consensus that humanitarian responses should 'do no harm' to consumers and markets and should ideally make use of market systems when and where they are functional"

(Henderson et al. 2013). The 2017 "Principles on public-private collaboration in humanitarian payments" is a useful illustration of how the language continues to shift. This document brings together 18 telecom and IT companies, financial providers, and international organizations to formulate standards for the digital delivery of humanitarian aid. The closest this document gets to traditional humanitarian language is the principle on "Protect, empower and serve the customer" (Cashlearning 2017). "Do no harm" does not feature in this document, while "accountability" is mentioned twice. The words "effective" and "effectively" are mentioned nine times, while "efficiency" features seven times. However, as these emergent soft law instruments talk about customers, they also talk about consumer protection, data protection, and privacy rights, thus also introducing new language and moving new bodies of law to the center of the humanitarian field.

Attendant to these developments, there is a new emphasis on humanitarian effectiveness as a kind of superior steering principle that is on par with traditional humanitarian principles. Humanitarian innovation is often pegged as a mode of delivering this effectiveness through incremental change: in its scoping article for the theme of effectiveness, for example, the WHS notes that "the humanitarian sector can make use of innovations in approaches, processes and technology in order to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action" (WHS 2014). Effectiveness is also regarded as the objective of innovation—as is illustrated by the language used in a recent report on innovation, which aims "to understand and recommend how best to strengthen and improve the humanitarian innovation ecosystem so it can make the best possible contribution to overall humanitarian effectiveness" (Ramalingam et al. 2015).

In a comment on the relationship between humanitarian ethics and effectiveness, Slim (2013) suggests that "effectiveness is essentially value-neutral. Something can be very effective even if it is very bad. Something can be effective even when it is not desirable." However, understood as part of the humanitarian vocabulary, with a specific trajectory and a specific set of connotations, "effectiveness" is not value-neutral. For example, the report *Leaving No One Behind*, released by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA 2015:27), gathers together key humanitarian accountability initiatives under the heading "Some Recent Efforts to Improve and Monitor Humanitarian Effectiveness".[5] The same report also places standards and certification under the heading of effectiveness, noting that "promotion of standards and certification has been another important approach to increase humanitarian effectiveness." At the same time, ideas on what it will take to achieve effectiveness vary along traditional lines (that is, between those who are less inclined towards the neoliberal agenda and

those who are more so). For the (often academic) critics of the so-called neoliberal turn in the humanitarian sector, the emphasis on effectiveness breaks with traditional humanitarian approaches and values (See generally Mark Duffield's work). Others see humanitarian principles as intrinsic to effectiveness: DARA (2014) describes humanitarian principles are "the cornerstone of aid effectiveness. Humanitarian response cannot be effective if it is not principle based. Following the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence everywhere is a condition for being able to be present in different situations." For its part, the ICRC notes that "maintaining dialogue with all parties ensures humanitarian effectiveness, in that it builds trust and permits access to those in need" (ICRC 2015).

Without making any normative pronouncements on these developments, it is clear that the language and rhetoric and thereby the way in which problems are framed, solutions are proposed, and stakeholders gain relevance and credibility has changed quite radically in a very short period of time. The rhetorical emphasis on social justice, empowerment, and participation emphasized by the rights-based approaches is absent, for example. That absence has more than discursive consequences when we think about *who* innovation is for. At the same time, by giving significant attention to the protection of the digitization of the beneficiary body, data protection, data security, privacy, consumer risks and the need for training, information, and customer support, the humanitarian innovation field contributes to something truly new, namely, to change and update the protection of civilians (PoC) language.

The humanitarian market as market

What is the "market" in the humanitarian innovation field? A key assumption behind the thesis that a turn to the private sector is necessary to innovate and in turn to provide "change" builds on assumptions that the humanitarian market looks like a regular market; that there always is a market that can become a humanitarian market; and that the humanitarian market has a regular stakeholder structure. At the same time, within the humanitarian sector, more broadly, there are many different assumptions about the role and nature of the market in this endeavor that need to be accounted for.

As commonly understood, a "market" is a physical space/geographic location ("the local market"), a more abstract composite of supply and demand ("plumpy nut makes up 75% of the market"), or, increasingly, an online space. There is a fundamental difference in producing goods and services for a free market and for a humanitarian market, but in the humanitarian innovation talk, the two often seem to be somewhat conflated. The humanitarian market is a quasi-market that consists of suppliers and humanitarian

customers that seek to fill the needs of crisis-affected people globally (Nielsen et al. 2016). As Binder and Witte (2007) note, the humanitarian market is not, in fact, a "regular" market but may be described instead as a "quasi-market," characterized by an indirect producer–consumer relationship—an insight that has implications for humanitarian innovation as well (Ramalingam et al. 2015). In the market for humanitarian relief, aid agencies are the producers, donors the buyers, and aid recipients the consumers. But these consumers neither purchase nor pay for the service. This structure yields a market that is loaded with asymmetries and uncertainties: donors have difficulty determining whether the services they pay for are adequately delivered, and recipients have few means of effectively making complaints or airing grievances (Nielsen and Santos 2013). This uncertainty also links to the discussion of scaling above: When humanitarian innovation hubs discuss the challenges of delivering to scale, the question of "which market" lingers. Should humanitarian innovation initiatives help new products and approaches be successful in the humanitarian market, or to be viable in a commercial market? If so, what are the implications of spending designated humanitarian funding in sponsoring for-profit initiatives?

Innovation is closely linked to the humanitarian financialization agenda, where beneficiaries are seen as "clients" and the aim is to alleviate need by financially capacitating these clients through quality financial services. The partnership between the World Food Program (WFP) and MasterCard, for example, uses "digital innovation to help people around the world to break the cycle of hunger and poverty" (MasterCard 2012). The idea is that "cash can go where people cannot" and draw beneficiaries further into the market economy—as customers. This raises the question about the moral hierarchy of relationships in the humanitarian innovation field and the end point question of the kind of long-term change the humanitarian innovation field seeks to effect and for whose ultimate benefit (see Vogel 2012). There will not always be a functioning market, and among the most vulnerable, not everyone shares the benefit flowing form markets, even if they are functional (NGO statement on file with author). From a critical academic perspective, despite assumptions about the humanitarian market being a "market," it must matter that the end users in the humanitarian market equation lack purchasing power, not as a point of denunciation but as the analytical starting point for empirical investigation of how the "indigent customer" label shapes the future of emergency assistance.

The thickness of shared objectives, rationales, and values

From a humanitarian sector perspective, the opportunity to gain access to expertise and resources is the principal rationale for including the private sector in humanitarian action. In addition to financial support, private sector partners can offer equipment (including software) and technical assistance (Anderson 2013). Moreover, there is a belief that because private companies are profit-driven, they have an incentive to meet contractual requirements for deliverables and time frames. Donors, for their part, are said to appreciate private sector involvement because it means lower overhead and less need for constant engagement and monitoring. However, the call for intensified private sector collaboration necessitates further reflection on assumptions regarding the "thickness" of shared objectives, rationales, and values, as well as the degree to which there is a shared understanding of the nature of humanitarian work.

The literature identifies a number of tensions: Binder and Witte (2007) note that attempts to pursue partnerships with corporate entities were often frustrated, either because agencies were unclear about the intended outcome of the partnership, or viewed it as a way of developing a long-term funding arrangement. According to Nielsen (2014), collaboration between the private and humanitarian sectors is currently characterized by underlying disagreements about what constitutes "meaningful" innovation and about the relationship between meaningful and responsible innovation. It is suggested that overall, private sector actors are frustrated by having to take on all the financial risks associated with product development, while humanitarians fret about potential public condemnation and donor criticism if a product fails to aid beneficiaries in the field (Nielsen 2014).

On a very general level, as a starting point, the humanitarian and the private sector have clearly articulated ideas about how certain values will drive change. The moral underpinnings of humanitarianism talks about imperatives and principles, with a focus on "doing no harm," aiding "according to need" and doing so in a neutral, impartial, universal, and humane manner (and so forth). A common way of conceptualizing innovation is to describe it as creating value from ideas—value that will differ between settings and sectors. In a recent report, Ramalingam et al. suggest that in humanitarian settings, this value can be seen as deriving from "new or improved products and services, processes, positions and paradigms"—which, when successful, bring about greater "efficiency, effectiveness, quality or social outcomes" (Ramalingam et al. 2015:10). In the political economy that underlies the assumption of "shared values," the private sector actively brands innovations as humanitarian—with the CSR implication that the company standing behind the innovations is also humanitarian. A contrary view is articulated by Mays et al. (2012), emphasizing the mismatch between business and humanitarian logistics, each of which is driven by a different set of values. Others have pointed to the resulting loss of ground truth, to the underlying motifs of risk

transfer to local actors (Duffield 2016), and to the poor quality that often results when private actors fail to understand humanitarian action, or to the lack of contextual knowledge and crisis management skills. Critics have also argued that businesses, by their very nature, are interested mainly in 'brand, employee motivation and doing more business' (Wassenhove 2014), and that intensified private sector engagement may lead to a 'marketisation' of humanitarian values. The point here is that the *assumption* of compatibility and coherence between private sector, profit-oriented business models, and humanitarian action in itself does work that needs to be interrogated.

Change: ideas and "messy social interactions"

There are myriad discussions about the transformative potential of innovation within the field. Present in many of these discussions are contestations over the nature and desirability of "transformative" changes. To illustrate this, the last part of the article considers three ideas about change and how they are articulated within the humanitarian innovation field, through the ways in which actors struggle to get their ideas realized, their visions of change accepted, and their agendas funded—what Dijkzeul (2015) describes as "the messy interaction of social actors." The first is that of "failing fast," the second concerns "game changers," and the third pertains to the reception of "disruptive innovation" in the form of cash programming.

The first example pertains to the traveling of concepts between the innovation field and the humanitarian field and how they are put to work. Ramalingam et al. (2015) observe that "many are calling for radical changes to both what humanitarian actors do and how they do it.". The humanitarian innovation literature has focused extensively on the role, import, and conditions enabling *degrees* of innovation, in particular the difference between "doing better" and "doing differently"—the difference between incremental and radical innovation.[6] Radical—or disruptive—innovation has the potential to shift existing organizational models but is also perceived to involve risk. From within the humanitarian innovation field, there is a sense that the sector wants and needs to transform but is unwilling to accept the attendant risk—to its public image, mandates, vested institutional interests, or beneficiaries (though not necessarily in that order). At the same time, the nature of the emergency field and the normative legacy of the do no harm imperative mean that some of the traditional innovation terminology becomes controversial. For example, the humanitarian innovation field has itself engaged critically with the idea of "failing faster" in order to "succeed sooner."[7] The ability to learn and rapidly readjust course is generally perceived to be central to successful innovation. As noted by Betts and Bloom, private

technology businesses are encouraged to "fail fast," divesting from the success of specific approaches under the assumption that failure will reveal successful approaches in the long run (Betts and Bloom 2014).[8] The mantra of "fail fast, fail often, and fail early"[9] is present in the literature on humanitarian innovation, often with little attention to trade-offs or costs (Blank 2013; Ries 2011) or in a manner that encourages humanitarian actors to simply embrace the risks that such a commitment to "experimental innovation" entails.[10] However, there is also awareness that the "fail fast" approach to humanitarian innovation benefits from the narrative of urgency and the distance between those responsible for failure and those who bear its costs. As noted by one commentator, "the "lean start-up" model of experimentation and fail fast may not be appropriate under conditions where the ethics of playing with people's lives may be at the heart" (Bessant 2016). To sum up, the nature and rhetorical traditions of the sector put certain constrains on *how* change may be envisioned.

The second example concerns the prevalence of "game changer talk." Definitionally, a game changer is a new element that significantly alters an existing situation or activity: a game changing technology holds the promise of changing not only how things are done and by whom, but what is possible within (or despite) a given context. For example, as illustrated by the case of drones, the "humanitarian" label is particularly important when the product in question is controversial, where the humanitarian setting offers an accessible site for experimental testing, or where the lack of good use cases makes a technology look like a "solution in need of a problem" (Sandvik and Lohne 2014). With their promise of real-time, more detailed views (as well as more detailed views) from above, drones are presented as offering enhanced situational awareness and faster and better-informed decision-making down below. Drones are presented as "game changing" for solving humanitarian problems, in addition to being "game changers" for development, peacekeeping, and the "war on poaching" (Sandvik 2015). To understand talk about change within the humanitarian innovation field, it is useful to consider that kind of work this specific concept does—and does not do. Generally, this type of change-rhetoric is frequent with respect to technological innovations "looking for" humanitarian problems to solve. Within the private sector, the ability to refer to one's work as "humanitarian action" and to one's products as "humanitarian goods" is simultaneously a public relations strategy, a way of engaging in corporate social responsibility and also a means of obtaining access to new markets.

The third example concerns the relationship between the moving bits and parts of the broader humanitarian change agenda and how we identify transformative innovations. In light of the sector-wide effort to "localize," humanitarian

organizations have been increasingly willing to frame themselves as a "transaction cost" that "needs to prove added value" (WHS, Charter for Change) (Aly 2013). Recent developments in cash transfer seemed poised to set in motions a development that could potentially transform the humanitarian sector at large. With evaluations indicating that aid recipients receiving case fare better than those receiving food and non-food items *or* cash vouchers, a ECHO-DFID initiative will put 80 million pound into a cash-only program operated by a single consortium; also decoupling operations, monitoring and evaluation by leaving the latter to a second actor (Parker 2017).[11] This particular initiative illustrates that radical change can lie not in the main objective of an intervention (giving cash) but in its potential knock-on effects for sectoral reform. The humanitarian sector has expressed deep concern about the loss of local knowledge and local leverage, suggesting that this will ultimately result in a loss of quality. It is also suggested that this form of market concentration towards agencies big enough to win such bidding processes will potentially mean fewer non-cash programs on the ground, less work for international aid workers but more for multinational consultancy firms and financial providers. Humanitarian coordination will be more difficult (Parker 2017). However, returning to the political economy perspective, the fear of structural disruptive change must be understood analytically as a very different phenomenon than the general risk averseness that permeates the sector as a whole. It is well illustrated by the complaint of a major NGO: "If you skip the proximity and empathy with victims of disasters, humanitarianism loses its sense" (unpublished report 2017 on file with author). In essence—if big cash works, what will become of big humanitarianism? From an academic perspective, it then becomes pertinent to tease out the relationship between the academic critique of humanitarian innovation as an enabler of a neoliberal market turn and the humanitarian industry's appropriation of this critique to protect its own interests.

Conclusion

This review article has explored the question of what humanitarian innovation is expected to deliver through an exploration of hypotheses, assumptions, and discussions about the nature and degrees of desirable change present in the humanitarian innovation field. On an overarching level, the article has interrogated by whom and for whom humanitarian innovation is carried out and what the long-term impact will be for humanitarian action. To understand more about the ways in which the humanitarian innovation field thinks about change, the article has culled together a theory of change that identifies as its point of departure the humanitarian innovation field expectations that the market and technology will provide vehicles for change. While the humanitarian sector has always used

technology of some kind and has always innovated, the merging of private sector and technology optimism under the humanitarian innovation frame has important distributive consequences that need to be unpacked. This hypothesis of change has been filled in by mapping out a set of assumptions about how technology and the market would function as drives for change. Taking a step back, the article has then surveyed ideas and contested concepts circulating in the humanitarian innovation field.

A key ambition of the article has been to provide conceptual support for empirical research into ongoing developments in the humanitarian innovation field. The article concludes by identifying three such areas in future research. The first concerns the end-user perspective. As emphasized in the introduction, by focusing on what professional humanitarians expect innovation to deliver, this article takes a narrow view of the field. The humanitarian innovation literature has itself reflected critically on "a lack of engagement with actors seen to be outside of response, including a longstanding and unjustifiable lack of engagement with recipients of aid" (Ramalingam et al. 2015). In an attempt to address this issue, the Draft Principles for Ethical Humanitarian Innovation (2015) speak of an ethical obligation to be ultimately accountable to recipients and highlight the relationship between providers and recipients as the primary relationship for humanitarian innovation.[12] The Draft Principles emphasizes that it "is particularly important to establish . . . accountability because of the position that end-users in the humanitarian system hold as 'recipients', rather than purchasers." Thus, attention must be paid to the parallel tracks of actual and rhetorical end-user inclusion.

Moreover, there is a general need for contextual considerations of the label "humanitarian innovation." In the humanitarian innovation field, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between routine improvements in supply chain management and what should count as an innovation, between normative efforts to set standards for new technology and innovation (as in the case of humanitarian drones) and between the mere adoption of new and convenient technologies that are broadly used by society at large, and the use of genuinely innovative technological adaptations with specifically humanitarian potential. In particular, there are important questions about the relationship between innovation, learning, and reform—and the "everyday." Cash programming has the potential to radically transform the sector as a whole. Whether we characterize this process as "disruptive innovation" or as reform or restructuring have important implications on how we contextualize and analyze the consequences for the sector.

Finally, as noted above, a small but important part of what humanitarian innovation will deliver to the sector at large is perhaps an enhanced risk and ethics consciousness about protectable digital bodies and how this

new protection obligation should be carried out. How the humanitarian innovation field contributes to change and to update protection of civilian language constitutes an important sub-field of future scholarly inquiry.

Endnotes

[1]Obrecht suggests that "in an innovation process, the causal pathway for change is unknown. Innovation projects can construct a general theory of change but the assumptions are more conjectural, making the theory much more like a hypothesis" (Obrecht 2017). Warner (2017) speaks of a "linearity that should be avoided in innovation."

[2]In their review of the literature on humanitarian innovation, Bessant et al. (2014) note that the field is immature: it emerged a century later than the broader field of management innovation and continues to suffer from a "paucity of quality research." One's response to this observation may depend, however, on how one defines "quality research." As Ramalingam et al. (2015) observe, what humanitarian actors and the private sector view as legitimate, in terms of academic engagement with innovation, is applied research designed to support evidence-based humanitarian action. Ramalingam et al. (2015) argue that while "academia could fulfill the function of 'critical friend,'" it has largely failed to do so: instead, academics have tended to focus on their own research questions and have been unwilling to engage in applied research on issues of concern to the humanitarian sector. However, this failure may also be attributed, in part, to the uncertain status of "critique" in the humanitarian field, which derives from two factors: first, the newness of the humanitarian sector as a field of academic study; second, the sense of urgency experienced by researchers and practitioners alike, as a consequence of the emergency settings in which much humanitarian activity occurs (Sandvik et al. 2014). As Taithe et al. (2015) note, *Critique is a discursive and constructive engagement based on reflection. Such reflection is arguably the foundation for institutional learning and progress. . . . However, critique is also often presented as undermining. . . . It therefore remains challenged within the humanitarian sector as a potential threat to modernisation and professionalization.*

[3]Though, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the operationalization is often partial and incomplete.

[4]Such as the joint USAID/DFID Humanitarian Innovation Initiative (2013).

[5]OCHA (2015) list includes the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (1994), the Sphere Project (1997), the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative (2003), the International Aid Transparency Initiative's Aid Transparency Index (2008), People in Aid (1995), and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (1997, as the Humanitarian Ombudsman Project).

[6]I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this comment.

[7]The "fail faster, succeed sooner" as a core axiom in the field of innovation. See http://ssir.org/articles/entry/fail_faster_succeed_sooner and http://oecdinsights.org/2014/04/10/fail-fast-learn-fast-and-innovate/.

[8]Betts and Bloom 2014 citing Babineaux, R. and Krumboltz, J. (2014). Fail Fast, Fail Often: How Losing Can Help You Win. New York: Penguin.

[9]See for example, Tiesinga, and Berkhout (2014).

[10]"The exploratory and uncertain nature of innovation means that some degree of "failure" is inherent, as results will often differ from expectations [...] organizations and donors will need to become less risk averse and embrace "failing fast" in order to support adaptation and improvement" (Obrecht 2016).

[11]The project would be only a small slice of overall aid spending, about 7 % of 2016 humanitarian funding in Lebanon.

[12]The author contributed to the drafting of these principles.

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