RUHR UNIVERSITY BOCHUM

**INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL LAW OF PEACE
AND ARMED CONFLICT (IFHV)**

European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation
a.y. 2023/2024

BEYOND CENTRALIZED AID
Community-based approaches in humanitarian
action in Afghanistan

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Word Count Declaration: 24082 words

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABSTRACT

This master's thesis investigates the primary challenges faced by community-based approaches in humanitarian action and their influence on the effectiveness of aid responses in Afghanistan. Community-based approaches represent a transformative shift towards collaborative efforts that integrate local perspectives and capacities into aid delivery, emphasizing the inherent tension between global standards and the imperative for a nuanced, culturally sensitive understanding of local realities from a more holistic and comprehensive perspective. In contrast to traditional centralized aid frameworks, community-based approaches aim to promote humanitarian aid in a decolonial manner, challenging western-centric or one-size-fits-all responses that emerged post-Cold War under liberal-democratic paradigms. Employing a qualitative methodology, this research conducts an exploratory study, drawing from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including reports, guidelines, and data from organizations such as UNHCR, OCHA, and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), as well as the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, International Rescue Committee, and Center for Civilians in Conflict. The study is grounded in a critical-theoretical framework, integrating perspectives from Humanitarian Action studies, Critical Security Studies, and sociological debates on the concept of community and the various social dynamics that constitute it. The investigation seeks to provide insights that advance both theoretical expansion and practical implementation in contemporary humanitarian action, emphasizing responsiveness, inclusivity, and effectiveness in addressing the needs of affected populations in non-western scenarios. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the debate on the dynamics of community-based approaches in aid initiatives, particularly in contexts affected by non-state armed conflicts. Using Afghanistan as a compelling case study, we analyze the results from the Afghanistan Community Voices and Accountability Platform, based on the 2023 data from the AAP Afghanistan Working Group. The Platform presents feedback results from communities consulted about aid delivery in this region. By doing so, we underscore the need for critical self-reflection within the humanitarian system to refine actions in response to diverse and challenging contemporary emergencies.

Keywords: Afghanistan, community engagement, community-based approach, Critical Security Studies, humanitarian action, non-state armed conflicts.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ACRONYMS

ACBAR	Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief
AP WG	Affected People Working Group
APP	Accountability to Affected People
BPI	Better Programming Initiative
CBA	Community-based approaches
CCPC	Community Civilian Protection Councils
CHE	Complex Humanitarian Emergencies
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
CIVIC	Center for Civilians in Conflict
CSS	Critical Security Studies
DfA	De-facto Authorities
ECOI	European Country of Origin Information Network
FCRM	Feedback, Complaints, and Response Mechanisms
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GTS	Ground Truth Solutions
HPC	Humanitarian Programme Cycle
HRBA	Human Rights-Based Approach
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IRC	International Rescue Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
Oxfam	Oxford Committee for Famine Relief

PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
TI	Transparency International
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations Hight Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

1.INTRODUCTION

Community-based approaches (CBA) have gained recognition for their potential to address humanitarian responses and establish alternative procedures for dealing with the impact of violence or conflict on emergency contexts around the world. This paradigm shift, moving from aid actors working for the community to collaborating alongside them, is important for designing and promoting social inclusion that encompasses the humanitarian work. It contrasts with the traditional aid framework, which tends to operate in a more centralized manner, rather than fostering broader national and local participation. The latter process can rely on community-based means, which are collaborative efforts composed of articulated methods of action within humanitarian and post-conflict recovery programming. These mechanisms aim to enhance the effectiveness of aid responses by thoroughly understanding the context and the affected groups, thereby ensuring better alignment with their needs and vulnerabilities, while also capitalizing on their resilience and pre-existing capacities (IFRC, 2016; OCHA, 2015).

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2015, p.1), community engagement - which serves as a pivotal mechanism in the implementation of CBA - involves 'a two-way dialogue between crisis-affected communities, humanitarian organizations, and, where possible, within and between communities'. This emphasis on intersectoral dialogue aims to foster cooperation, thus contributing to a community-informed aid response, and enhancing its effectiveness within the assisted areas. This approach has the potential not only to empower communities in a decolonial manner but also to address key debates within the humanitarian field, including power imbalances, the imposition of western values, and other interconnected criticism.

Community-based responses prioritize dialogue over top-down solutions, ideally providing an engaging analytical framework that enables discussion through two main dimensions. Firstly, communities possess an inherent understanding of their realities and prevailing challenges, thereby assuming a fundamental role in shaping their own future. Secondly, and frequently acknowledged but often neglected in practice, humanitarian emergencies have become more unique and multifaceted. While this reality challenges the feasibility and effectiveness of standardized international processes and practices in aid responses, it also creates opportunities for more context-specific interventions that ideally acknowledge the need for a holistic analysis. This

includes recognizing people's expertise and using it inclusively to design and adjust humanitarian programming. By investing time in collaborative procedures and actively involving different communities in participatory engagement and decision-making processes, aid agencies enhance their capacity to facilitate crucial discussions about protection. Consequently, they are better able to address the concerns and interests of affected groups. This entails the involvement of crisis-affected people in one or more phases of a humanitarian project or program: assessment, design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation (Grimaud, 2023; Linning, 2023), meaningful feedback mechanisms and accountability, and/or reliable information provision (OCHA, 2015).

While community-based approach has gained significant traction on the humanitarian agenda, it's important to note the existence of certain paradoxes and contradictions associated with its implementation. One paradox arises from how 'community' is interpreted among humanitarian actors, manifesting in both methodological and operational challenges. These interpretations often narrowly define the term based on geographical location or individual characteristics, thereby potentially overlooking the crucial social dynamics and shared interests that are fundamental to understanding community. Therefore, this research highlights the potential contribution of sociological perspectives to inform humanitarian initiatives. It underscores the importance of identifying the most suitable definition of 'community' and appropriate operational mechanisms for a specific circumstance, thereby enabling more responsible and contextually appropriate efforts to effectively address unique needs and challenges.

For instance, Max Weber offers a perspective rooted in social structures, power dynamics, and other socio-cultural variables that shape communities, thereby providing a deeper understanding of their complexities. We acknowledge this standpoint as an opportunity to delve deeper into the subjective motivations behind human actions and social processes, aligning well with the nuanced approach needed in humanitarian research and aid delivery in the field. According to Weber, 'communities are defined in terms of the solidarity shared by their members, which forms the basis of their mutual orientation to social action'. It is noteworthy that, according to the author's perspective, community is not necessarily contingent upon mutual understanding or harmonious social interactions. Instead, it is 'manifested in those relationships and communal actions which are relevant to the members' positions within the larger society or relative to other communities' (Neuwirth, 1969, p.149).

Weber also outlines that communities may encompass differences in language, religious beliefs, lifestyle, customs, and may consist of individuals from diverse social and economic backgrounds (Neuwirth, 1969). Another author, Ferdinand Tönnies, can also be instrumental in this discussion. His work can contribute to our understanding of personal reciprocal relationships and shared beliefs in the formation and sustenance of community. Integrating fundamental theoretical aspects from humanitarian research and leveraging insights from other fields of knowledge, such as sociology, presents an opportunity to improve aid practices. In the context of community-based approaches, this involves not only facilitating connections between communities and humanitarian actors but also ideally fostering collaboration among the communities themselves.

This framework, which considers and is guided by the specific context or circumstances in which aid responses are applied, can be particularly relevant when considering the scenario of Complex Humanitarian Emergencies (CHE). These emergencies, often characterized as crises of the 1990s in the so-called less developed part of the world, typically encompass internal conflicts (distinct from traditional interstate-based notions of war) and/or international aggression, leading to a wide array of consequences, requiring efforts from the international community (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 1994). According to Väyrynen (2022, p.301) it 'is usually large-scale domestic violence which, in addition to killing people, exacerbates the existing problems of external and internal displacement of people, their food provision and health care'. Non-state armed conflicts serve as an example of CHE. This aligns with a broader argument emerging from the contemporary (or liberal) humanitarian system, which suggests that modern conflicts have become increasingly intricate. Therefore, aid delivery must be more radical adapted and redefined accordingly to help meet the vulnerabilities and needs of victims.

This new system embraces a 'much more political dimension of humanitarian assistance that was no longer at responding above all the victim's needs and suffering, but instead to stimulate more political and social processes' (Nascimento, 2015, n.d). As consequence, it welcomed a broader range of activities aimed at advancing transformation initiatives, including human rights advocacy, development assistance and democratic reform (Barnett, 2011; Barnett, 2005). This reflects a conscious shift from the classical humanitarian doctrine, which 'provides relief; it offers to save individuals, but not to eliminate the causes that placed them at risk' (Barnett, 2005, p.724), and often overlooked violence reduction and prevention.

Such a trend emerged from discussions about the effectiveness of aid delivery, primarily based on the experiences of humanitarian organizations in the camps in Zaire during the international aid response to the crisis in Rwanda in 1994. During this time, 'a flood of agencies - many there simply to fly the flag and impress prospective donors - were feeding the architects of the genocide in camps in Zaire, fueling their rearmament, and potentially causing more harm than good' (Barnett, 2005, p.735). The shift in aid delivery creates new opportunities for humanitarian action, while increasingly emphasizes the concept of 'shared responsibility' for human protection and the promotion of international security (UNDP, 1994, p.24-25; Buzan; Hansen, 2012). For instance, aid organizations have shown a greater effort to measure long-term impact and effectiveness by considering their objectives and the needs of beneficiaries. This hinges on aid actors being thoroughly informed and aware of the context's characteristics. Achieving this goal demands integrating both the Conflict Sensitivity and the Do no Harm principles as essential components of reliable information provision and context analysis in humanitarian response.

Conflict Sensitivity extends beyond mere comprehension of the political setting; it encompasses the acknowledgment of the interaction between aid organizations and the context in which they operate. This includes acknowledge that humanitarian actors may inadvertently influence the course of conflicts or even exacerbate humanitarian crises; and how the environment can impact the humanitarian response itself (Oxfam, 2021). A fundamental aspect of this is the Do no Harm perspective, which derives from the must for humanitarian actors to mitigate potential negative consequences and optimize positive outcomes in their actions (Oxfam, 2021; IFRC, 2016). Both intersection principles, along with community engagement, constitute the foundational elements of the Better Programming Initiative (BPI) within the framework of the Red Cross and Red Crescent's resilience projects and multi-stakeholder methodology.

The Red Cross emphasizes that 'good programming and community engagement require a solid understanding of the local environment and the role – both actual and perceived – that we play – whether we operate in a context with high levels of social instability, violence, and conflict, or more stable and predictable settings' (IFRC, 2016, p.8). The organization underscores the significance of the humanitarian principle of neutrality as a central component in facilitating successful community engagement (IFRC, 2016), and – ideally – to ensure the security for humanitarian staff, as well as acceptance and trust within among all involved parts (Chatelet; Sattler, 2019).

Indeed, data illustrate a troubling pattern of attacks against aid workers. According to the Aid Worker Security Database (2023), there has been also a significant rise in kidnappings of humanitarian practitioners in recent years. Securing consent from all parties involved is fundamental for any response to emergency endeavor. Equally important is ensuring that individuals assisted explicit understand the methods and objectives of the aid initiatives. This underscores the urgent need to tackle operational challenges and implement effective strategies to improve humanitarian operations. This involves ensuring a safe humanitarian space and closely monitoring the effectiveness, and accountability of aid delivery, tailored to the expectations and needs of the affected populations (De Torrenté, 2004).

The humanitarian principle of neutrality seeks to facilitate the operations of aid organizations, especially in politically volatile and insecure environments. It aims to enable these actors to reach various affected groups without being perceived as aligned with any specific agenda, which could favor one party over another. At the same time, refrains from imposing or dictating specific courses of action in the field. However, neutrality has long been a contentious issue, as ensuring it can be challenging not only for the aid personnel themselves but also for those seeking assistance, whose perceptions may vary regarding the political stance of the organization.

Fiona Terry (2022, n.d) argues that 'adopting a neutral posture does not confer moral equivalence on perpetrators and their victims. Instead, it opens avenues to help the latter'. While the author highlights the operational nature inherent in neutrality, which aligns with another operational classical principle, independence, theoretical critical perspectives suggest that even the distinction between groups as perpetrators and victims may evoke moral dilemmas. This is particularly apparent in analyses based on the objectivity of discourse and imposed truths, which may imply biased judgments and, in the humanitarian field, establish a moral hierarchy among victims, determining who deserves humanitarian assistance and who does not (Weiss, 1999).

This argument constitutes a significant aspect of the critique surrounding the politicization of the humanitarian field, particularly within the framework of new humanitarianism. The focal point of concern revolves around the potential for aid to be manipulated as a tool for advancing political agendas within specific contexts, and against particular initiatives, hostilities, or any actions that may disadvantage certain groups. One notable case in point is Afghanistan, where international responses to aid have frequently been contingent upon shifts in Taliban policies regarding human rights violations (Nascimento, 2015; Bandeira, 2023), particularly in relation to

gender-based topics. This exemplifies what Nicolas De Torrenté (2004, p.4) refers to as the 'instrumentalization of humanitarian action in the service of political ends', manifested here in the form of aid conditionality, which imposes moral and/or political choices as prerequisites for receiving relief support.

In doing so, a tension arises between the imperative to acknowledge the diverse and intricate nature of contemporary emergencies and the tendency to approach them with standardized 'universal' values and assumptions, as well as 'universal morality, such as the promotion of democracy and human rights' (De Torrenté, 2004, p.5). During campaigns such as the United States 'war on terror' and the interventions that follows 9/11, there's a trend to oversimplify violence dynamics in non-western states, in this case, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the reasons comes by dichotomizing labels into representations of 'good' (typically associated with the west) and 'evil', often attributed to entities opposing the west. From this perspective, the west is portrayed through a secular notion (and role model) of state, with stability and progress firmly grounded in liberal and democratic values, intersecting with 'universalist' views on individual and collective well-being. This standpoint also underscores concerns about insecurity in non-western states, frequently attributed to factors such as underdevelopment (Sabaratnam, 2013).

This discussion encompasses various facets, including the exploration of opportunities and constraints associated with expanding the concept of security to encompass individuals rather than solely the state (Buzan; Hansen, 2012). At its core, human security recognizes that peace and stability are not solely dependent on military state defense but also on the imperative to prevent and alleviate suffering resulting from the violation of fundamental rights and human dignity. This includes addressing challenges such as famine victims, population displacement, and infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS (UNDP, 1994; Duffield, 2001). Consequently, it is interesting to notice that what constitutes 'complex emergencies reflect the multiplicity of threats to human security' (Väyrynen, 2022, p.314).

Nonetheless, this remains a contentious issue, considering that 'the expansion of the scope of the security concept beyond survival and physical threats is inspired by the liberal tradition in which the freedom of an individual from fear and want has been regarded as a collective good serving the best interests of the community' (Rothschild, 1995 apud Väyrynen, 2022, p.314). Such assumptions tend to overlook the ontological root causes of emergencies and the multifaceted complexities and challenges inherent to both the conflicts and the identities of the communities in

the context (Barnett, 2011; Duffield, 2008). This opens critically informed avenues for discussion about various aspects of humanitarian and security studies, including the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches in international aid operations.

The structure of this master's thesis is defined by engaging with some of these relevant debates, focusing on addressing the research question: What are the primary challenges encountered by community-based approach in humanitarian action, and how do these challenges influence the effectiveness of humanitarian responses in Afghanistan? Our investigation aims to leverage valuable insights from ongoing theoretical critical studies on humanitarian responses in non-western regions and non-state armed conflicts, and to highlight the significance for self-critique within the humanitarian system, while exploring the opportunities and challenges when implementing a community-based approach. This provides a prospect to explore the successes, gaps, and challenges within contemporary humanitarian action in complex emergencies, utilizing Afghanistan as a case study. It also delves into the parallel theme of perceived shortcomings in the effectiveness of international humanitarian efforts in this region, and potential avenues for improvement.

The research is organized into three Chapters - complemented by this Introduction (first Chapter) and a Conclusion (fifth Chapter) -, each of which also contains supplementary subsections. The thesis structure unfolds as follows. The second Chapter, entitled *The New Humanitarian Paradigm*, explores the essence of new (or liberal) humanitarianism, with a particular focus on the debate between false universalism - especially within the liberal-democratic model - and the localism framework in humanitarian initiatives. We examine how these differing perspectives impact the effectiveness and ethical considerations of humanitarian responses, highlighting the tension between global standards and the need for a holistic and socially sensitive understanding of local realities.

This analysis is crucial to the debate on community-based initiatives. Drawing insights from the theoretical framework of Critical Security Studies (CSS) regarding the liberal-democratic perspective and critical theoretical studies in Humanitarian Action, we aim to highlight the profound shifts in aid delivery witnessed since the 1990s, particularly the adoption of methodologies focused on addressing the root causes of human insecurity and vulnerability, while also delving into the pivotal dilemmas it poses, encompassing both moral and operational intricacies.

The third part of the thesis, the Chapter entitled *Community participation in humanitarian programming*, explores the components of humanitarian responses, emphasizing the integration of community engagement and community-based approaches. It also analyzes the dimensions of the concept of community through a sociological lens to clarify its implications in humanitarian discourse. The emphasis lies in elucidating the inherent paradoxes of community-based approaches within humanitarian responses, especially when juxtaposed with the intricate complexities and dynamics prevalent in diverse social contexts. Thus, acknowledging the sociological dimensions of community assumes paramount significance in the domain of humanitarian aid. To enrich our analysis, we conduct a theoretical-critical examination of key manuals focused on implementing community-based interventions. This evaluation assesses both the opportunities and limitations inherent in their definitions of community, as well as the methods implemented (or intended but often failing in practice) in the field.

Overall, this discussion forms the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in this subject matter. This Chapter also includes an analysis of accountability, transparency, and feedback mechanisms within aid design and implementation projects. This aims to compare the expectations outlined in the manuals and guidelines with the actual scope of implementation. The objective is to consider community perspectives on feedback platforms, thereby better delineating the challenges in community-based approach programming. This methodological scope is particularly crucial at the operational level.

In the fourth Chapter, entitled *Contextualized Humanitarian Programming: Community-Based Approach in Afghanistan*, we investigate the application of community-based approaches within the context of Afghanistan. This analysis builds on insights from the previous sections, emphasizing the importance of context-specific analysis and highlighting the limitations of universal, standardized procedures in aid responses. While the universalist perspective tends to generalize and prioritize broad principles, the localism standpoint, as discussed in the second Chapter, and including the sociological angle in the third Chapter, emphasizes the unique characteristics of communities and their contexts. This emphasis is crucial for fostering authentic inclusive dialogue, ideally enhancing the overall impact and effectiveness of contemporary humanitarian action.

Afghanistan serves as a compelling case study to illustrate these discussions, providing invaluable insights into humanitarian action over more than two decades and the subsequent

debates and criticisms it has sparked. These considerations encompass various aspects, notably the politicization of humanitarian efforts and the constraints of a liberal-democratic oriented perspective. Additionally, Afghanistan's non-state armed conflict nature offers an opportunity for the findings of this research to have broader applicability. The insights gained from analyzing the community dynamics within such conflicts and their interaction with humanitarian response strategies have the potential to inform and enhance various methodologies for humanitarian aid delivery integrated with community engagement worldwide. To deepen our investigation, the fourth Chapter analyzes results from the Afghanistan Community Voices and Accountability Platform, using 2023 data from the AAP Afghanistan Working Group. The Platform gathers feedback from communities on aid delivery in the region across four periods throughout the year. Specifically, the feedback includes 2,010 responses in the first quarter (Q1 – January to March 2023), 4,282 in the second quarter (Q2 – April to June 2023), 10,005 in the third quarter (Q3 – July to September 2023), and 29,294 in the fourth quarter (Q4 – October to December 2023). This analysis is crucial for providing insights into community perspectives on humanitarian actions and their effectiveness - or lack thereof.

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, focusing on an exploratory study of the challenges encountered by community-based approaches in Afghanistan. The research draws upon primary sources, including materials such as reports, manuals/guidelines, and resources accessible through platforms like Relief Web and United Nations databases – particularly from UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – as well as documents from other organizations such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, International Rescue Committee (IRC), ActionAid, and the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), were consulted during this phase of the investigation. Importantly, it also draws upon information from sources such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) regarding the Accountability to Affected People (AAP) framework. This includes survey findings and activities, emphasizing the importance of community engagement and participation in all phases of the humanitarian response (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023).

Our research is underpinned by a critical theoretical framework that integrates perspectives from Humanitarian Action studies, Critical Security Studies, and the sociological debate on community. By doing so, our study is dedicated to making significant contributions to the field, bridging the gap between scientific inquiry and practical implementation. This integrated approach

provides a robust and interconnected framework, offering an innovative contribution to the discourse and advancing theoretical development in the field of contemporary humanitarian action. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding community-based approaches and their implementation mechanisms in non-western contexts.

2. THE NEW HUMANITARIAN PARADIGM

In this Chapter, we delve into the factors that have shaped and defined international humanitarian action since the 1990s, while examining the paradoxes and challenges that have arisen within this field. One key focus is the increasing significance of the liberal-democratic perspective integrated to the concept of human security, alongside the materialization of the so-called new humanitarianism during the post-Cold War. The term new humanitarianism is employed within the realm of humanitarian action to denote a shift in aid delivery, now aiming for 'a combination between the immediate needs and future development, reinforcement of local services and structures, empowerment, participation and enhancement of the populations' capacities, human rights promotion and protection (including gender issues) and contribution to peacebuilding' (Nascimento, 2015, n.d).

It follows a new, integrated approach, rooted in a global moral imperative to promote, and safeguard the well-being of all individuals worldwide. In addition to that, it is closely 'related to the need for a linkage between emergency and development assistance' (Nascimento, 2015, n.d), which gained force during the mid-90s within the context of consolidated liberal ideals and norms to promote international order and 'unit', capable to address widespread human rights violations and armed conflicts, especially those involving non-state actors (Abrisketa, 2000).

During the post-Cold War period, the concept of new humanitarianism emerged alongside the international community's recognition of the impacts of Complex Humanitarian Emergencies (CHE). These emergencies, as defined by the United Nations, occur in regions or societies where there is a significant breakdown of authority due to internal or external conflicts. That encompasses 'internal' civil conflicts, and thus extends to certain characteristics, including the government's inability to effectively ensure the protection of its population and maintain a monopoly on security (Dijkzeul, 2008). Gradually, they require a coordinated and multidimensional international response that exceeds the mandate or capacity of any single humanitarian organization.

The discussion here revolves around two interconnected key points. Firstly, there is a pressing need for a more coordinated approach within the international aid sector, which has led to initiatives such as the Sphere Project. Launched in 1997, the Sphere Project aims to establish universal minimum standards in humanitarian assistance. Its primary contribution is the creation of the Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, which is based on principles reflecting international support for people affected by disaster or conflict: the right to life with dignity, the right to receive humanitarian assistance, and the right to protection and security (Sphere, 2018, p. 29). In addition, the Sphere Handbook emphasizes people's right to fully participate in decisions that affect them. It underscores the importance of advocating for 'systematic community engagement', which is crucial for enhancing communication and accountability in humanitarian action for crisis-affected people.

Community protection mechanisms, such as community-led and self-help initiatives and community-led mediation, are underscored as integral components for the success of humanitarian operations (Sphere, 2018). The document serves as a pivotal tool for contemporary aid delivery, utilized by both national and international agencies - both state and non-state - in guiding the planning and execution of humanitarian operations. Its scope extends beyond addressing immediate needs to encompass tackling underlying social and structural vulnerabilities, with a keen focus on establishing sustainable response systems for affected populations.

Secondly, there is a growing recognition that the classical humanitarian[1] perspective, characterized by a set of subjective and operational principles, including neutrality (not taking sides), and ideally aimed to preserve a genuine humanitarian ethos free from ulterior motives, falls short in adequately addressing (and resolving) complex humanitarian emergencies. The counterargument asserts that embracing a broader approach to aid introduces politicized agendas, thereby corroding the fundamental doctrines of humanitarianism. This can have extensive operational implications, particularly regarding the protection of humanitarian actors and ensuring their access to victims, especially in politically volatile scenarios.

In addition to that, counterarguments also cite the perspective of the new humanitarianism in which underscores the implications of integrating development, security, and humanitarian

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[1] Classical humanitarianism, historically linked with the efforts of the Red Cross and its founder Henri Dunant, is founded upon core principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. The aid response is exclusively driven by emergency and based solely on need, extended to all parties involved or impacted by a humanitarian crisis (Gordon; Donini, 2016).

efforts, thus forming what is known as the 'triple nexus'. This concept suggests that by leveraging synergies between these three sectors, the triple nexus aims to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of humanitarian response and recovery efforts. This discussion often leads to a broader examination of the concept of security, encompassing the human aspect intrinsic to it, and it acknowledges that civilians face various vulnerabilities, such as economic instability, social inequality, and human rights violations, which are essential factors to consider in efforts to promote and sustain peace. This interpretation has become intricately intertwined with western politics and culture. For instance, during the mid-1990s, many humanitarian projects heavily depended on long-term funding from western governments.

Consequently, these aid efforts were often built on existing priorities aligned with political agendas (Roberts, 2000). Over the past 10 years, the main source of international humanitarian assistance has continued to be government donors (specially the United States, Germany and European Union institutions), providing mostly bilateral contributions to aid organizations, such as the UN system and NGOs. In terms of which contexts receive international humanitarian assistance, there has been little change over time, with the largest cumulative amount of funding being channeled to Yemen and Syria. However, in 2022, Ukraine received the largest amount, totaling US$ 4.4 billion, compared to the US$ 17.8 billion and US$ 4.4 billion received by the two aforementioned countries between 2017 and 2021 (Development Initiatives, 2023).

These two key points mentioned - (i) the international recognition of the need for a more coordinated and universally standardized approach within the international aid sector, and (ii) the limitations of the classical humanitarian perspective in addressing complex emergencies - are integral to a broader contemporary discussion about aid initiatives. This discourse within scientific academia encompasses both supportive and skeptical viewpoints, exploring the potential benefits or, from a critical perspective, the concerns, associated with the increasing politicization of contemporary humanitarian action (O'Brien, 2004, p.2-3). The central issue arises from humanitarian agencies being perceived merely as conduits and humanitarian aid being viewed as either as a means for or a substitute for politically oriented interventions. Considering this, David Rieff (2002) argues that humanitarianism has evolved into a dual-purpose tool, serving both emancipatory goals and counterinsurgency strategies, as illustrated by the case of Afghanistan. Moreover, it has emerged as a vehicle for seeking enduring solutions in regions grappling with crises, with the overarching aim of enhancing people's lives.

Within humanitarian action, some scholars critically assess the effectiveness of this new paradigm, especially in non-western contexts. They argue that, as it closely aligns with a politically motivated framework focused on transformation and crisis prevention, often rooted in the concept of liberal peace, the new (or liberal) humanitarianism may lack certain essential components that are sensitive to the unique circumstances of each case. The liberal peace thesis aims to 'meet the demands of 'human security' and human rights' (Chandler, 2004, p.61), and points that economic progress and social order, rooted in democratic and liberal foundations, are crucial for preventing and reducing the scalation of armed conflicts and human suffering.

However, this perspective is unlikely to secure international consensus. While the approach aims to address the root causes of armed conflicts, its effectiveness in handling complex humanitarian emergencies remains uncertain. This uncertainty partly originates from the initial reliance on 'universal' standardized assumptions, which can result in confusion and misinterpretation, often stereotyping the victims, perpetuating clichés, and oversimplified views of humanitarian crises, especially in contexts of armed conflicts. Additionally, it is often influenced by the traditional interests of major powers and their political ambitions (Rieff, 2002). Authors like Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2002) and others emphasize the significance of acknowledging these disparities and the importance of promoting cross-cultural dialogue to challenge hegemonic paradigms. This entails examining the discourses entrenched within human rights politics and the concept of human security, topics that are further elucidated in the subsequent section.

The theoretical-critical perspective central to our analysis is pivotal for understanding the challenges and paradoxes within the contemporary humanitarian system, particularly those surrounding the community-based approach. A fundamental aspect of this perspective is the debate between false universalism and local meanings, which can be addressed through the promotion of intercultural dialogue, in this case, within humanitarian initiatives. This debate is further explored in the second part of this Chapter. Both interconnected sections aim to enrich the discourse surrounding aid delivery in a decolonial manner, rooted in a people-centered perspective capable of embracing bottom-up dialogue between crisis-affected communities and humanitarian organizations. Specifically, our analysis focuses on the integration of these perspectives within the framework of the new humanitarian paradigm.

2.1 Enhancing human security and development: a cross-border human-centered approach

The concept of 'human' in human security 'has shaped and altered security narratives and practices' (Christie, 2010, p. 171), entailing a fundamental shift from the traditional state-centric approach in international relations. It broadens the focus to embrace the protection and well-being of all individuals and addresses multidimensional challenges, including poverty, population displacement, and famine. The 1994 Human Development Report, presented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), introduces 'human security' to encompass broader human-centric concerns related to individual protection. This report was instrumental in shaping subsequent global discourse in this field, emphasizing four essential pillars: (i) it is a universal concern, indicating that many threats are common to all people; (ii) the components of human security are interdependent and can spread globally, such as terrorism and disease; (iii) human security is easier to ensure through early prevention rather than later intervention; and (iv) it is people centered, focusing on the well-being and dignity of individuals.

It concerns how people live their lives, the opportunities they have to achieve fulfillment, and their protection from various threats (UNDP, 1994). To address the challenge of human security, the report underscores the necessity for a new development approach to mitigating underlying vulnerabilities to avoid countries reaching a crisis point. This extends beyond immediate threats to encompass tackling structural aspects, emphasizing the imperative of fostering inclusive and equitable 'sustainable human development' (Duffield, 2008), mainly through efforts focused on eliminating poverty, building social cohesion, and fostering effective governance (Paris, 2004, p.21).

This new concept of security marked a significant step towards a more ambitious and optimistic agenda for global cooperation in social and economic development, and the promotion of democracy. The desire to maintain such commitment acts as a catalyst for a more interconnected and cooperative world, where other concepts, such as sovereignty, can be limited when in pursuit of a greater 'common good'. This means that while states remain the primary entities responsible for promoting and protecting human security, it is acknowledged that some may fail to fulfill this role. In such cases, regional and global alliances can emerge to secure community structures, respond to actual or potential threats to their stability, while addressing concerns of human well-being and the integrity of the international order itself. By doing so, it aims to promote a unified sense of human community, which often optimizes the international response to a wide range of

common vulnerabilities (Williams; Krause, 2002, p.45). The premise prompted several states to adopt a more ambitious stance in reinforcing an international commitment to the moral imperative of advancing universal freedom (from fear and want - the two components of human security), and global peace (Dijkzeul, 2008; Christie, 2010).

To clarify, this shift isn't solely driven by altruism but also by political interests. It's not just about the protection of humanity per se; rather, this discourse contributes to a more legitimate approach, from a liberal-democratic standpoint, to address issues that could affect both the great powers themselves and the international order. A typical example of this is the focus on counter-terrorism activities, partly justified by heightened apprehension in the west regarding the rise of 'new wars' (or intrastate wars), as observed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and the subsequent threat they pose to liberal democracy. It mainly involves the maintenance and expansion of an order already established under specific political dimensions (Bandeira, 2023).

The theme of migration serves to illustrate this argument. As Dijkzeul (2008, p.42) notes, 'it became obvious that weak, failing states triggered a flow of economic migrants and refugees. In other words, allowing weak states to disintegrate had international consequences'. It indicates that so-called 'failed states' are perceived as inherently associated with danger and instability across social, economic, and political dimensions. Simultaneously, these instabilities can have significant repercussions at both systemic and global levels. The idea of 'failure state' 'results from the inability of political institutions to provide even the minimum order necessary to enable a tolerable life for citizens and peaceful routine interactions among individuals' (Ayoob, 1995, p.19).

Above all, however, critics argue that such a label can be overly simplistic and stigmatizing, as it overlooks several other elements that characterize the complex realities within these contexts and has granted greater relevance and power to the western narratives. This is particularly addressed in Critical Security Studies (CSS) and dependency theory in International Relations, which, while not our primary focus, is important to acknowledge. The latter perspective suggests that colonial heritage, along with other historical factors beyond the control of so-called 'third world', places some countries at a disadvantage in the development race (Ayoob, 2002). It is argued that this disparity should not be seen as a failure of the countries themselves but as a manifestation of power imbalance and structural violence that is perpetrated by the international system. The CSS directly addresses the complex dimensions of promoting and maintaining peace. In contemporary security studies, the theoretical approach aims to challenge imposed criteria, such

as development dynamics, and provide space for discussing the nature and purposes of security concepts in world politics (Williams; Krause, 2002).

An interesting aspect related to the human security discussion, which can be challenged by this critical theoretical perspective, is that it provides a framework for understanding conflict and insecurity patterns rooted in social vulnerabilities. In this perspective, development is seen as a preventive tool to address 'problematic' social behaviors, which, in turn, has fostered the acceptance of political strategies and goals aimed at achieving a liberal peace in the long term (Christie, 2010, p.173). The ideal of liberal peace emphasizes the significance of implementing multifaceted mechanisms capable of reconstructing and transforming a wide range of 'weak' and 'failing' systems into ones that can promote and safeguard human and economic development. It emphasizes the need for integrated strategies that address both immediate security concerns and long-term development goals, as one cannot be achieved without the other (Duffield, 2008).

Indeed, this interpretation often links violence to the lack of political and economic progress, as well as social instability in a region. While there an undeniable growing ambition among both state and non-state actors, including humanitarian, human rights, and development organizations, to become more involved in the human security movement, the international community, including the United Nations, as highlighted by Dennis Dijkzeul (2008, p.43-44), often struggled due to limited operational capacity and a lack of adequate resources. As a result, international responses frequently failed to effectively address long-term structural threats and vulnerabilities.

At the same time, there is substantial evidence suggesting that the outcomes of implementing a democratic-liberal perspective in processes aimed at restoring a status quo in a specific region may be limited for a variety of motives. One reason for this is the inclination to oversimplify or impose ideological frameworks concerning politics and social structures without fully grasping the intricate dynamics and established mechanisms within the context, particularly from the community's viewpoint. This prerogative involves the risk of assuming that experiences and identities unique to the west are universal. Consequently, it is often presumed that placing emphasis on universal values is the optimal - or sole - means to advance international peace and guarantee human protection. In some cases, however, inadequate understanding of the situation on the ground contributed to disorder rather than alleviating the problems (Ayoob, 1995).

From this point, communities assume a critical role, both in being a source of information regarding needs assessments to identify current and anticipated challenges, and by fortifying self-

reliance and enriching their own social cohesion. Collective self-reliance is built upon social structures within local communities, enabling them to function with unity, social accountability, and mutual dependence. This involves making decisions, mobilizing resources, and enhancing interpersonal capacity to address challenges and implement initiatives for mutual benefit (UNHCR, n.d). By empowering communities to address their own concerns, human security initiatives aim to cultivate resilience and foster a collective sense of responsibility for peace and stability, rather than relying solely on international responses.

Paradoxically, 'self-reliance is a system of dynamic adjustment, adaptability and risk management that, in effect, simply maintains the status quo'. Humanitarian and human rights projects encompassing self-reliance often aim to 'reduce poverty by changing behavior and attitudes' (Duffield, 2008, p. 68-69), introducing new forms of social and political organization. However, such initiatives would need to carefully consider local cultures, values, and histories, as argued before, to ensure its genuine relevance and effectiveness. This approach aligns with the Conflict Sensitivity and Do no Harm principles, which are increasingly recognized as crucial for humanitarian and development entities. It focuses on the specific particularities of the context in which staff operate, as well as the potential effects of these circumstances on the humanitarian response itself, and reciprocally, the influence of the humanitarian response on the context (Oxfam, 2021). However, operationalizing these principles often remains a challenge, particularly when it comes to including local actors and their perspectives at various stages of a humanitarian project or program.

The principle of Conflict Sensitivity refers to 'the ability of an organization to '1. Understand the context it operates; 2. Understand the interaction between its intervention and that context and; 3. Act upon this understanding in order to minimise negative and maximise positive impacts on conflict' (Oxfam, 2021, p. 2). Its relationship with the Do no Harm principle stems from the idea that if a humanitarian actor fails to grasp the context, the organization's impact on it, and vice versa, it risks causing more harm than good. This principle, especially relevant in conflict situations, emerged from recognizing that aid can significantly influence emergency dynamics (De Torrenté, 2004) by, for example, indirectly fueling or funding conflicts.

This approach also recognizes that by understanding local contexts, humanitarian and development organizations can better enhance community capacities, improve resilience, and foster empowerment, ultimately enabling people to shape their own futures. Projects within a

conflict sensitivity framework are closely linked to the triple nexus, which connects humanitarianism, development, and peace. This integrated approach enables the implementation of humanitarian initiatives that are multidimensional and long-term, contributing to structural changes, community harmonization, and the promotion and protection of human rights (Oxfam, 2023; Bandeira, 2023). For instance, these initiatives encompass supporting social protection, fostering job creation, and advancing peacebuilding efforts (Oxfam, 2021).

It's intriguing to note that in certain scenarios, both Conflict Sensitivity and the Do no Harm principles are within the purview of international humanitarian responses. However, in places like Afghanistan, despite years of implementation, these principles have not led to structural or long-term changes. This could be due to two main issues. Firstly, humanitarian and development organizations have faced challenges in effectively implementing these approaches, highlighting the necessity for more radical, tailored methodologies for aid response, coupled with enhanced self-critique regarding its operational procedures. Secondly, especially in non-state armed conflicts, some situations may require an even more comprehensive analysis that goes beyond the Conflict Sensitivity and Do no Harm principles. This entails not only considering local dynamics, including cultural nuances, historical grievances, and political complexities. It also involves challenging universal and presumed understandings of concepts such as security, poverty, development, and human rights (Bandeira, 2023).

In the next section, we will delve deeper into these concerns, with the human rights-based approach as the guiding framework. This rights discourse has become a key component of contemporary humanitarian action (Barnett, 2011). We will particularly focus on the debate surrounding the clash between false universalism and local meanings, especially considering the distinctive importance of addressing specific needs of non-western communities. The primary objective is to emphasize the importance of promoting cross-cultural dialogue, particularly as a factor contributing to the effectiveness of community-based approach in humanitarian initiatives.

2.2 False universalism vs. localism in humanitarian initiatives

The ongoing discourse surrounding the intersection of universal human rights, grounded in liberal-democratic values, and the preservation of local traditions and cultural diversity fuels critical debates within contemporary humanitarian endeavors. Essentially, the theoretical-critical

perspective, which remains sharply divided among scholars, underscores the importance of acknowledging international protective measures while also shedding light on their limitations. These limitations arise from their foundation within a neoliberal international framework that prioritizes a rights-centric narrative, but often neglects to fully consider contextual nuances and cultural diversity. This argument aligns with what Malcolm Langford (2018) describes as 'sociological illegitimacy' in the imposition of human rights. It refers to the ambition of imposing standards shaped by the values of a 'single culture' to address the 'problems' of others (Langford, 2018; De Sousa Santos, 2002).

Moreover, a significant aspect highlighting the importance of cultural interface involves challenging the assumption of universality within human rights field. While this aligns with the notion of international shared responsibility for human protection, as discussed in the previous section, it also raises discussions about the recognition that presumed liberal-democratic values, supported by various international institutions, may not be universally accepted, or fully integrated into non-western contexts. This prompts several considerations, such as how international human rights standards can be effectively implemented in diverse cultural contexts without imposing a one-size-fits-all approach. One starting point could be to recognize the importance of the role of local communities, which can play a significant part in shaping an agenda for human dignity that fits their specific needs. Addressing concerns like this requires a nuanced viewpoint that advocates for cross-cultural dialogue among stakeholders to co-create mechanisms that are both globally relevant and locally resonant (Santos, 2002).

In his work, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2002, p. 44) argues that the concept of human rights is a form of western localism advocating for its widespread acceptance and universality. This concept of 'global localism' illustrates the spread of western values and assumptions on a global scale. The 'pragmatism' behind establishing a universal, standardized perspective for human rights was presented as an intentional moral imperative aimed at enhancing individuals' well-being and fostering respect for their fundamental freedoms and dignity. This is particularly evident in the discourse surrounding various (common) social vulnerabilities and the importance of integrating politics into a broader agenda that encompasses both rights and development for peace promotion.

However, the author indicates that although human rights are often perceived as universal, they lack holistic unity and do not garner consensus, either in their conceptual understanding or in how they are precisely addressed within international politics. Even more prominent, though, is

the critique that, in terms of promoting rights, there's often a failure marked by inequality and inadequacy, particularly in reaching those who need them most. This scenario becomes even more complicated when countries and other stakeholders (including state and non-state organizations) that have supported collective cases directed towards social rights persist in advocating for robust actions that rarely reflect local customs, and needs of local communities (De Sousa Santos, 2002). This oversight, particularly concerning humanitarian efforts using a human rights-based approach, proves insufficient in addressing today's threats to protection in complex emergency scenarios.

In the context of liberal humanitarianism, the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) is frequently utilized to tackle inequalities that impede development. It prioritizes human rights obligations outlined in both international and customary law, acknowledging their universal and indivisible intrinsic nature. The HRBA emphasizes the duty bearers' (principally the state) responsibility to fulfill their obligations, and aim to empower individuals, or 'rights-holders', to assert and claim their fundamental rights (UNSDG, 2024). According to the UNHCR (2008, p.16) 'a rights-based approach is founded on the principles of participation and empowering individuals and communities to promote change and enable them to exercise their rights and comply with their duties'.

The ongoing debate concerning criticism of top-down human rights initiatives, including HRBA, often involves discussions shaped by postcolonial and post-structural perspectives, especially regarding the underlying limitations related to the core values embedded in rights-development claims. Our aim is not to merely agree or disagree with, or to advocate for, a cultural relativism perspective. Instead, we seek to highlight, while also examining alternative approaches, a significant (yet frequently overlooked) emphasis on power-oriented perspectives stemming from culture-specific politics, all viewed through a 'human rights lens' (Barnett, 2002).

De Sousa Santos (2002, p. 44) offers a significant viewpoint on this issue, underscoring that, 'against universalism, we must propose cross-cultural dialogue on isomorphic concern'. This involves understanding a spectrum of factors, with two being particularly relevant to our discussion. Firstly, it involves acknowledging diverse cultural conceptions of human dignity rather than insisting on western-constructed human rights indicators. As related to this perspective is the importance of recognizing that 'the South's long-standing promotion of human rights is often neglected'. This includes social movements from and for their own communities to defend and claim their rights (Langford, 2018, p.74).

Secondly, it's crucial to acknowledge the importance of cross-cultural dialogue, which should stem from a mutual recognition of the inherent incompleteness within all cultures, rather than promoting one as a model of progress for others to emulate. It also involves implementing a progressive multicultural approach, which entails practicing cultural sensitivity and promoting community inclusivity as essential prerequisites to achieve a balance between global competence and local legitimacy. Both points are particularly crucial as they fundamentally challenge the notion of a western model as the sole framework capable of improving lives and potentially advancing structural progress and social cohesion (Santos, 2002).

This suggests a tension between so-called cosmopolitan solidarist and pluralist perspectives in international relations. Cosmopolitan solidarists emphasize international responsibility towards political and moral obligations, and it is driven by the interest in universalizing the rules of international and public law, with the goal of maintaining economic and political unity (Ulmen, 1994). While pluralists 'essentially tolerates different value systems and does not make judgments about different forms of justice and rights'. It contrasts with the cosmopolitan solidarist viewpoint, which advocates for the expansion of responsibilities beyond national borders. However, this expansion is critically analyzed as being both 'practically and morally impossible' (Newman, 2013, p.6).

By recognizing diverse context-based perspectives, humanitarian efforts can better align with the values and needs of persons. In practice, this often entails adopting a community-based approach to effect progressive change, which encompasses including various interest groups in humanitarian and human rights responses. The notion of community engagement efforts focuses 'in particular on building the capacity of communities to identify priorities and opportunities and to foster and sustain positive neighborhood change' (Chaskin, 2001, p.291) or, in other words, on the community's capacity to construct social change efforts. This can serve as an initial basis for sectoral-level mechanisms designed to reconnect with community perspectives and foster their active participation in the decision-making process, thereby ensuring more inclusive and (ideally) effective outcomes in humanitarian matters.

Engaging with affected communities in humanitarian responses aims to address their needs by promoting dialogue between these communities and humanitarian organizations, as well as fostering interaction within and among the communities themselves. This includes facilitating communication to ensure accurate sharing of information and feedback. Such engagement enables

the identification and response to community concerns, needs, and vulnerabilities, while also leveraging their pre-existing capacities, including community-led and self-help initiatives, which can serve as alternatives to informal dispute resolution (OCHA, 2015; Sphere, 2018).

It is noteworthy that despite the growing recognition of the advantages of community-based mechanisms, the human rights and humanitarian sector has made relatively few explicit attempts to comprehensively define the concept of 'community.' The existing literature also falls short in adequately addressing how this ambiguity impacts the moral and operational dimensions that shape the scope and effectiveness of community engagement and community-based approaches - a topic that is analyzed in the forthcoming Chapter.

3. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING

In this Chapter, we delve into the foundational components of effective humanitarian responses, with a specific focus on community engagement and community-based approaches (CBA). Our investigation begins by defining each concept individually and examining their respective strengths and limitations within operational procedures. However, we recognize their intrinsic interconnection, with community engagement playing a crucial role within CBA. Integrating both components is essential for developing inclusive, community-informed plans in the humanitarian sector. When managed effectively, these methodologies have the potential to enhance aid delivery responsiveness, protect vulnerable populations, and (ideally) mitigate harm in a decolonial, bottom-up perspective.

As a complementary aspect of our discussion, we delve into an examination of the fundamental essence of 'community' itself. This investigation integrates perspectives from both sociology theory, which often emphasizes context-based definitions, and insights from the operational side derived from humanitarian organizations' presence in the field. By doing so, we aim to compare how these two fields define and assess the complexities of communities, enhancing our understanding of how humanitarian studies can benefit from a nuanced sociological perspective in addressing this theme. The term 'community' is often associated with a 'sense of identity or belonging that may or may not be tied into geographical location' (Hill; Turner, n.d, p.65). By analyzing the intersection of sociological insights with humanitarian practice, the Chapter identifies practical strategies for engaging with communities and promoting sustainable community-led initiatives. This is crucial, particularly given the imperative in humanitarian

response to navigate and respect diverse social dynamics while preserving the principles of Conflict Sensitivity and Do no Harm, as discussed in the second Chapter.

The sections presented ahead complement the preceding analysis by further exploring the inherent paradoxes associated with adopting a 'universalist' approach to human protection. By nature, a universalist perspective seeks to apply standardized principles and methods across various contexts. However, communities are inherently diverse, each characterized by its pluralism and possessing its own distinct set of concerns, interests, and social dynamics. The implementation of principles and mechanisms aimed at universality, particularly when grounded in liberal-democratic discourse, can paradoxically result in overlooking the nuanced and distinctive characteristics of communities. This discussion is part of a broader study that aims to address a profound dilemma in humanitarian studies: the effort to understand the rationale behind escalating international efforts to tackle complex emergencies through increasingly ambitious long-term projects, while simultaneously confronting the persistent challenge of effectively delivering aid to those who need it most. While universal liberal-democratic principles serve as a crucial foundation for human protection, and helps to legitimize interventions in the name of human rights, their assumptions may not be universally embraced or effectively put into practice to aid the most vulnerable.

Counterarguments in humanitarian studies emphasize the necessity of using localized approaches that incorporate community participation. This method aims to better meet the needs of affected groups, especially in non-western scenarios, by acknowledging the diverse contexts and cultural intricacies of their realities. Hence, emphasis is placed on the importance of cultural and conflict sensitivity perspectives, while highlighting that the latent biases ingrained within western-centric ideals, when presented as universal truths, risk perpetuating a subtle form of 'cultural imperialism' (Ulmen, 1994) or what Santos (2002) terms 'global localism'. This not only sidelines or outright disregards the unique historical and cultural contexts of other societies but also fosters a sense of unitary centralism in international relations and reinforces dominant power dynamics in world politics.

The tension stemming from disagreements over the most effective strategies to advance human well-being presents a fundamental challenge for contemporary humanitarian efforts and profoundly influences the approach to delivering aid. Addressing the diverse needs of communities and fostering structural change increasingly emphasizes the importance of striking a delicate

balance between adhering to universal standards and acknowledging the diversity of cultural and social dynamics. This pivotal aspect underpins the development of mechanisms aimed at effectively supporting and meeting community needs while ensuring their active participation in humanitarian initiatives. As highlighted by the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), this notion of 'support' implies working 'with (and not on behalf of) civilians'. The organization 'follow communities' own protection priorities and, jointly with them, explore if and how CIVIC can add to their existing agency, leadership and technical capabilities to address these priorities more effectively' (Linning, 2023, n.d).

CIVIC is one of the humanitarian organizations working with an inclusive, community-based protection approach, playing a facilitative role to better strengthen communities' engagement with armed actors to reduce conflict-related civilian harm. Some noteworthy examples include initiatives with communities in Afghanistan persuading the Taliban to allow a telecom company to establish cellphone service in a district and committing to not destroy the network to ensure the population maintains access to mobile services. In Nigeria, a success story emerged from addressing the systemic issue of sexual harassment by certain military personnel in a particular Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camp. Through dialogue channels established between local communities and troop commanders, a strict order was issued prohibiting soldiers from accessing the IDP camp after 4pm (Linning, 2023).

When examining the challenges encountered, it is crucial to highlight a concern raised by CIVIC regarding self-protection in these contexts. While communities often act as initial responders providing humanitarian assistance at emergency sites, they do not hold the status of humanitarian personnel and therefore lack international protection in this regard. This is particularly concerning when there is a risk of communities being perceived as aligned with a specific party in the conflict due to their involvement in humanitarian responses (Linning, 2023). It is also interesting to note that while community participation and engagement are recognized as crucial factors - emphasized even in the Sphere Handbook (2018, p. 79), which stresses the importance of training staff to possess competencies such as 'listening, enabling inclusion, facilitating community dialogue, and empowering community decision-making and initiatives', - there is a noticeable discrepancy between these humanitarian action manuals, principles, and other operational and mission guidance of aid, and what is actually applied in the field.

According to the Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) Annual Report 2022, the organization conducted interviews with over 13,000 individuals across more than a dozen countries. The report highlights that these individuals express a clear common interest: 'to be treated with respect, to have a say in the allocation of aid in their name, and to actively participate in their own long-term recovery' (Ground Truth Solutions, 2022, p.22). The study results highlight a significant deficiency in engagement with communities, where even basic consultations, such as those regarding cash assistance, appear to be lacking. Specifically, it says that only 8% of aid recipients in Chad felt their essential needs were adequately addressed, while in Haiti, a mere 2% claimed to understand the allocation process of humanitarian funds, despite 98% stressing the importance of receiving such information (Ground Truth Solutions, 2022).

Ground Truth Solutions is a Non-governmental Organization (NGO) that influences the design and implementation of humanitarian responses in various scenarios, by advocating for a human-centered approach through its research, consultations, and data analysis. The organization's findings underscore a pressing need for humanitarian organizations to prioritize both meaningful and genuinely inclusive engagement with their assisted communities. Failure to address this deficiency risks undermining the effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian assistance efforts, ultimately impacting the lives of those most in need. Understanding and incorporating community perspectives can significantly enhance the relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of aid interventions, thereby improving overall outcomes in humanitarian efforts.

Considering these introductory discussions, this Chapter is structured into three complementary sections that explore various aspects of community from both practical and theoretical perspectives. The first section emphasizes community-based and community engagement approaches, aiming to clarify their essential objectives, while also addressing practical barriers that hinder effective implementation. In the second section, we delve into the concept of community itself, using a sociological framework that emphasizes the complexity of its definition. This section also explores related discussions, such as those on globalization and identity.

Additionally, we compare this perspective with key frameworks and guidelines/manuals from major humanitarian actors involved in community-based efforts, specifically UNHCR, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and ActionAid. These actors were selected based on the availability of publications related to the theme and their explicit definitions of community, as well as the procedures, mechanisms, and objectives for such interventions. This selection also considers

the multidimensional nature of each organization. Here, we analyze humanitarian mechanisms and sociological theory through dual lenses, emphasizing the importance of integrating practical application with theoretical insights, which may or may not originate from studies on aid itself.

Finally, the third and concluding section encompasses the Accountability to Affected People (AAP) framework, developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). This framework aims to promote a 'coordinated approach to community engagement and participation, emphasizing inclusion of affected people in decision making, implementation, and evaluation in all phases of the response' (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023, p. 1). By delving further into the discussion, our objective is to navigate the intricate complexities inherent in diverse scenarios and illuminate intersecting challenges, such as operational and moral dilemmas, within contemporary humanitarian action. By integrating communities into its programming, the aim is to ideally ensure a dignified and efficient response to the needs of people in complex (pluralist) emergencies.

3.1 Humanitarian response programmes: combining community engagement and community-based approaches

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2015, p.1), community engagement entails 'a two-way dialogue between crisis-affected communities, humanitarian organizations and, where possible, within and between communities.' This emphasis on multifaceted communication seeks to cultivate cooperation, thereby facilitating an aid response that is both well-informed and grounded in the community's own understanding of the main challenges that affect them, while also recognizing and leveraging their pre-existing capacities to self-protection and self-help initiatives. Community engagement rests upon three primary pillars: information provision, involving communities in decision-making processes, and establishing channels for feedback and complaints, all aimed at fostering accountability to those affected by emergencies (OCHA, 2015).

Within the first pillar, the importance of access to reliable information and data responsibility is underscored, a perspective endorsed not only by OCHA but also echoed by key humanitarian actors such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. They emphasize the critical significance of access to accurate information, likening its importance to that of essentials such as

food, water, shelter, and medicine. This recognition is based on the understanding that accurate information is indispensable for coordinating humanitarian responses, guiding stakeholders in decision-making and advocacy initiatives, and facilitating the aid delivery operational process itself. It enables humanitarian personnel to conduct thorough risk and needs assessments and identify vulnerable cases and patterns crucial for effective provision of humanitarian assistance (Gazi, 2020).

For affected populations, access to information contributes to situational awareness, empowering individuals to identify when and where aid is available, who is providing it, and to make informed decisions tailored to their circumstances. This is particularly crucial in extremely volatile and insecure environments (OCHA, 2015; IFRC, n.d.). The topic of data responsibility, also addressed within the scope of community engagement in this first pillar, is acknowledged as a significant concern in the humanitarian field. This underscores the necessity for implementing measures and precautions when collecting, handling, and sharing sensitive personal data. While surveys and datasets containing information about assisted groups can be beneficial for humanitarian response, this specificity of the humanitarian sector does not exempt it from the responsibility towards affected individuals aid actors are assisting. As stated by Gazi (2020), 'data protection is a longstanding priority during humanitarian assistance. It could be conceived as an aspect of the 'do no harm' principle, which requires humanitarian actors to endeavor not to cause further damage and suffering as a result of their actions' (Gazi, 2020, p.6).

The second pillar places a strong emphasis on involving communities in decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. This entails actively engaging them in communication and participation throughout the entire humanitarian program cycle - it includes humanitarian needs overview, humanitarian response planning, and response implementation and monitoring (IASC, 2015, p.12). Central to this is the cultivation of support and cooperation. Ideally, this should be facilitated through a dialogue mechanism that recognizes the importance of community-oriented perspectives, which is fundamental for fostering respect, 'strengthening relationships, building trust and promoting sincere collaboration, and increasing collective self-efficacy and resilience' (Unicef, 2024, n.d). The aspect of trust is noteworthy in this discussion, as it plays a role in fostering long-term engagement and lasting dialogue among stakeholders, including assisted groups. This aspect is closely linked to the community engagement approach because involving assisted groups in decision-making processes can establish platforms for dialogue, which

contribute to addressing topics such as the relevance of humanitarian assistance, often questioned in long-term emergencies nowadays.

As highlighted by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC, n.d), this second pillar in community engagement 'can help prevent rumors and improve security and acceptance', as well as manage communities' expectations. Ideally, this approach catalyzes comprehensive structural and methodological reforms within the humanitarian sector, emphasizing a shift towards more people-centered efforts. Such reforms are crucial for effectively addressing and mitigating risks, including the promotion of secure access for humanitarian personnel, and for addressing the context-based vulnerabilities faced by assisted groups (IFRC, n.d, Chatelet; Sattler, 2019).

The third pillar is centered on channels for feedback and complaints. This entails creating avenues for tangible collective action that actively incorporates community voices into efforts, rather than disregarding them, adapting humanitarian responses accordingly. This highlights the need for regular, explicit dialogue and the meaningful participation of affected people. Additionally, it underscores the significance of nurturing a genuinely collective approach and influencing community perceptions of humanitarian responses, all while pinpointing areas for enhancement. The previous two pillars - information provision and community involvement in decision-making processes - intersect with the promotion of feedback and complaint mechanisms.

Such intersection forms a comprehensive approach that paves the way for achieving meaningful accountability in humanitarian programming, a central aspect of community engagement. As highlighted by Viviane Lucia Fluck and Dustin Barter (2019, p. 8), some barriers to effective accountability mechanisms must be considered, including 'lack of phone access, illiteracy and affected populations being unaware of their rights to hold humanitarian actors to account' - a point that transcends mere practicality or logistical concerns. This emphasizes the intricate challenges of not only providing platforms for complaints but also ensuring that communities have the necessary access and knowledge required to participate effectively (Fluck; Barter, 2019).

These mechanisms are indispensable prerequisites for fostering transparency, responsiveness, and trustworthiness at every stage of the aid response process. However, achieving this balance requires initially focusing on conducting needs assessments within specific country contexts across various sectors. This should be achieved through collaborative and coherent

response plans carried out in partnership with communities, aiming to guide projects toward a more decolonial approach. For example, incorporating online complaint mechanisms, as part of a potential initiative to fulfill the third pillar of community engagement, may falter in effectiveness when communities lack internet access. This context-based evaluation represents a critical initial step, integral to the principle of conflict sensitivity, outlined in the second Chapter. Not only does this hold the potential to prioritize local cooperation and nurture context-based perspectives over traditional top-down methodologies, but it also signifies a fundamental shift towards empowerment and reliance on pre-existing capacities and community-led initiatives.

From a practical standpoint, as the aid sector comes under growing scrutiny regarding its effectiveness in assisting those in need, the importance of these three pillars becomes increasingly apparent when implemented effectively. With the number of vulnerable people growing and the demand for resources escalating[2], these pillars are essential for ensuring aid reaches its intended destinations. They hold the potential to prevent aid from being distributed randomly, instead ensuring (ideally) its targeted delivery to where it's most needed, thereby enhancing both efficiency and social impact. Thus, humanitarian work transcends mere aid provision; it necessitates meticulous coordination, strategic decision-making, and the cultivation of meaningful cooperative relationships not only with communities and humanitarian actors but also, where possible, among communities themselves. As noted by Chatelet and Sattler (2019), 'failure to listen to communities will not stop them voicing opinions and priorities, but will simply mean the system will risk becoming increasingly irrelevant and ineffective' (Chatelet; Sattler, 2019, p.6).

Another humanitarian perspective addressing this concern is Community-Based Approaches (CBA), where community engagement serves as a pivotal mechanism in its implementation. CBA integrates the principles of participation, empowerment, and resilience, with its primary focus being 'to seek out local capacities, perceptions of problems, and ideas about solutions, and enter into a relationship with community structures who are motivated to support, activate, and expand the capacities of community members to achieve positive self-protection' (International Rescue

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[2] According to the Development Initiatives Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023, there was a significant increase in humanitarian funding from both public and private donors, rising from $36.9 billion in 2021 to $46.9 billion in 2022. This increase was particularly notable in funding requested for humanitarian crises in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. The report also points that 'at the time of writing, requirements for 2023 have already eclipsed this, with a total USS 54.9 billion requested to meet new and worsening crises' (Development Initiatives, 2023, p.13). Conflict was the primary issue for 87% (354.3 million) of individuals in need, residing in countries experiencing intense conflict. Additionally, 85% (343.6 million) lived in socioeconomically fragile nations, and 58% (236.7 million) were in countries highly susceptible to the effects of climate change.

Committee, 2024, n.d). The effectiveness of this approach relies on humanitarian personnel being integrated into a coordinated, inclusive, and cooperative aid response that puts the affected populations at the center of all efforts. In practice, is precisely concerned with 'strong and genuine partnership between state and international protection actors and local, community-based actors, which recognizes the multi-layered complexity of protecting people in crisis' (Berry; Reddy, 2010, n.d).

In this context, community participation refers to the collective effort of achieving community integration through shared goals. Various factors influence how the humanitarian response is implemented, making it essential not only to establish contact with the community but also to identify their needs and common interests. This process involves building community profiles, conducting context analysis using a holistic approach, performing risk and needs assessments, defining impact indicators, and integrating follow-up protection strategies in the final phases (International Rescue Committee, 2024; Burtscher, 2016). By closely aligning humanitarian actors' efforts with context-based concerns and priorities, the community-based approach presents valuable avenues for aid organizations to gain a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges faced by communities in diverse settings. This enables them to tailor their initiatives more effectively, addressing the root causes of vulnerabilities and potentially leading to a more inclusive and sustainable response.

Communities play a central role in supporting people during emergencies, often serving as the primary responders. Given this pivotal role, the integration of community participatory methods is heavily contingent upon recognizing and supporting their self-led and self-help initiatives. In fact, this method proposed for inclusivity grounds that it is important not only to acknowledge and empower local initiatives but also underscores the significance of fostering local partnerships capable of establishing cross-cultural foundations for positive change. Moreover, by fostering collaboration not only within communities but also, where possible, between communities, CBA has the potential to facilitate the expansion of effective strategies and programs.

In doing so, in theory at least, it contributes to building a comprehensive response that targets diverse community needs and concerns, thus reinforcing resilience and collectively addressing their safety and dignity. The basic principles outlined here involves participation and empowering individuals and communities, aiming to cultivate collective responsibility among both community

members and duty bearers in addressing risks and strengthen protection (UNHCR, 2008). Kate Berry and Sherryl Reddy (2010) assert that 'community-based protection directs the attention of communities towards protection problems over which they have some control and responsibility. This is possible even in circumstances where the most serious human rights violations are actively perpetrated by the state, non-state actors or international actors.' This premise emphasizes that although communities may not have the capacity to entirely prevent cases of insecurity, they possess the potential to play a crucial role in restoring their dignity, an integral component of the broader concept of human security, and to engage in efforts to protect themselves from harms.

At the normative level, discussions flared up on the conceptual realm of protection. Traditionally, according to the interpretation rooted in International Humanitarian Law (IHL), the focus is on prioritizing physical safety - shielding civilians from deliberate attacks in armed conflicts, with corollary obligations to hold perpetrators accountable. However, there exists a broader perspective that extends beyond mere physical safety to encompass a wide array of human rights assurances. In practice, this manifests as a dilemma between short-term and long-term protection premises. The latter is associated with a broader definition of humanitarian action that includes addressing human rights violations. Both perspectives (short-term and long-term) emphasize the importance of implementing protective mechanisms. However, within the short-term approach in contemporary humanitarian action, some (mostly traditional) organizations often 'refuse to identify the perpetrators of human insecurity, and they do not publicly pursue political avenues which may provide more durable protection' (Jose; Medie, 2015, p.521).

Indeed, this discussion holds significant weight, particularly when it comes to the lack of consensus on the involved ethics. However, when we consider the imperative of preserving the humanitarian space and adopting a community-based approach, two additional points emerge as particularly relevant to the discussion. Firstly, it is incumbent upon humanitarian actors to comprehend the contextual landscape in which they operate. This involves identifying all relevant groups, both armed and non-armed actors, understanding their characteristics, and discerning their interests. However, it's important to note that this analytical process does not inherently entail advocating for structural or behavioral change.

Secondly, we acknowledge that interacting with affected communities and individuals can profoundly alter the dynamics of humanitarian responses. In this regard, it's preferable for humanitarian actors to transition into mediators rather than solely acting as primary agents for

change. Central to this is the operational humanitarian principle of neutrality. Neutrality fosters dialogue among interested groups, with humanitarian actors facilitating discussions grounded in the perspectives of these groups and their proposed solutions to the existing challenges (Grimaud, 2023). As a final preliminary note, it's worth highlighting that while the community-based approach holds promise for fostering locally driven initiatives and challenging top-down interventions within humanitarian operations, it also sparks discussions regarding the challenges and limitations associated with its implementation. Through a Do no Harm lens, it's crucial to recognize that many of the safeguard mechanisms mentioned earlier are only truly effective if community-led and self-help initiatives, and community-led mediation, do not inadvertently subject individuals to additional risks in emergency scenarios.

Certain studies suggest that community-based protection is more effective in contexts of 'relative stability', especially within development scenarios (Berry; Reddy, 2010). However, this perspective may overlook the practical necessity, as areas with the ultimate humanitarian need often deviate from this description. Moreover, it is also argued that relying solely on these contexts can be counterproductive, considering that bottom-up approaches (intertwined with community participation) have the potential to precisely challenge western-centric or one-size-fits-all responses, as well as to promote humanitarian aid in a decolonial manner. To thoroughly address this discussion, in the next section we delve into the conceptual framework of 'community' itself, drawing from both humanitarian organizations' perspectives and enriching it with a sociological theoretical framework.

Among humanitarian actors, the lack of a clear understanding of 'community', especially when considering the intricacies of specific contexts, can pose a fundamental obstacle to effective and coordinated humanitarian efforts. This challenge is exacerbated by perspectives that often prioritize narrow definitions based solely on geographical and demographic aspects, overlooking the more subjective facets of social structures. Such a narrow focus risks rendering the concept vague and ambiguous, thereby diminishing its practical significance. Understanding how 'community' can be perceived in diverse ways through sociological lenses allows us to assess which concept is most suitable depending on the context. This awareness is crucial for effectively tailoring humanitarian efforts to meet specific needs and challenges, particularly in contexts where diverse understandings of community and underlying senses of identity shape various social dynamics.

3.2 Unraveling 'community': a comprehensive conceptual perspective

The term 'community' is widely employed in contemporary discourse across diverse fields, including international relations, politics, human rights, and humanitarian action. Paradoxically, despite its extensive use, it lacks a clear definition, leading to conceptual ambiguity and making it difficult to establish normative objectives that can effectively relate to and involve communities. Adrian Little (2012, p.1) notes that 'perhaps the lack of conceptual clarity around community has made it such an attractive tool for politicians, theorists, and policymakers'. This ambiguity not only allows for flexible interpretation and broad application but can also be strategically exploited to advance particular agendas without a firm commitment to the core values of community or a genuine interest in fully comprehending the pluralism surrounding it.

Community, inherently grounded in association and a shared sense of solidarity and belonging among its members, manifests in diverse ways shaped by contextual intricacies. This pivotal recognition emphasizes the interplay between universalism and localism in our research, as highlighted in the previous Chapter. Within the realm of humanitarian responses, such dynamic presents both a challenge and an opportunity for innovation. This underscores the importance of flexibility in addressing the widely varying needs of each community, alongside the necessity for a clear and specific methodology that can be adapted to different situations or contexts. Such an approach has the potential to ensure that while aid interventions remain flexible, they are firmly rooted in structured and effective practices.

The discourse surrounding the concept of community has become prominent especially within the context of a globalized world. This increased attention arises from the acknowledgment that in an era of globalization, individuals seek out communities as sources of security and familiarity amid the complexities of what appears to be an increasingly unstable modern life (Paruzzo; Volpato, 2009). The author Zygmunt Bauman aptly captures this sentiment by suggesting that communities serve as stable anchors in a world marked by hostility. Globalization has profoundly transformed contemporary perceptions of community by fostering interconnectedness among diverse social groups across various geographic contexts, regardless of whether those communities are defined by specific geographical boundaries or not. Another feature in this debate is that the global dynamic, when interacting with local contexts, continuously shapes and redefines itself, making communities changing entities influenced by both global forces and local identities (Paruzzo; Volpato, 2009).

Max Weber, one of the classical and most renowned authors in community theory studies, posits that 'communities are defined in terms of the solidarity shared by their members, which forms the basis of their mutual orientation to social action' (Neuwirth, 1969, p.149). According to the author, community does not solely rely on mutual understanding or seamless and harmonious social interactions. This contrasts with the perspective of the social contract, which emphasizes the pursuit of social order maintained through governance authority in exchange for protection. Instead, Weber's ideas are rooted in the sense of solidarity among its members, reflected in a network of relationships and collective actions aimed at preserving their shared interests and the protection of communal integrity.

This is further reinforced by a particular social esteem that binds community members through their collective actions and social structures. In this sense, solidarity is 'manifested in those relationships and communal actions which are relevant to the members' positions within the larger society or relative to other communities' (Neuwirth, 1969, p.149). According to Stuart Hall (2006), while the concept of community evokes a sense of shared interests, it is also characterized by a dynamic of 'identity strengthening'. Essentially, in this perspective, identity can be seen as a defensive reaction by groups feeling threatened by challenges to their existence or relevance.

Another author, Manuel Castells, also discusses community while exploring the concept of identity. In this context, the concept of identity encompasses various forms: (i) legitimizing identity, which seeks to extend authority and domination over a social actor; (ii) resistance identity, associated with actors experiencing conditions of domination, who establish bases of resistance and survival by opposing principles upheld within societal institutions; and (iii) project identity, grounded in mobilizing a group for social transformation. Here, the goal is to 'build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure'. This dynamic is exemplified, for instance, by movements advocating for women's rights (Castells, 2011, p.8).

Two additional points warrant attention in the discourse on identity. Firstly, this perspective becomes particularly significant within the framework of contemporary society, where globalization facilitates greater geographical mobility, leading to the phenomenon where 'individuals lose their ties to locality and family'. Secondly, it is asserted that 'identities are more fluid in contemporary societies. People can change identities over their lifetime. They can choose who they want to be in a society in which traditional loyalties are breaking down' (Abercrombie;

Hill; Turner, 1998, p.171). Bauman (2001, p.126) outlines that the so-called 'problem of identity' in modern times is not merely about finding identities within a social spectrum and gaining recognition for them. Rather, it centers on the challenge of 'which identity to choose, and how best to keep alert and vigilant so that another choice can be made in case the previously chosen identity is withdrawn from the market or stripped of its seductive powers'. It is intriguing to note that the author, drawing on Eric Hobsbawm's studies, underscores the widespread use of the term 'community' in contemporary discourse, even though genuine communities - those embodying a cherished sense of 'shelter of security and confidence hotly to be desired' - are becoming 'hard to find in real life' (Bauman, 2001, p.128-129).

Although our focus is on the community, it is important to distinguish it from 'society'. While they may seem similar in some interpretations, it is crucial for our discussion to clarify that they are distinct concepts. For this, we draw upon Ferdinand Tönnies' (as one of the key authors in this theme) understanding of community (*Gemeinschaft*), which relates to 'those life-forces associated with the instincts, emotions, and habits.' This contrasts with the concept of society (*Gesellschaft*), which, 'unlike the former, is characterized by the predominance of deliberation and conscious choice over the strivings rooted in man's nature' (Wirth, 1926, p.419).

In other words, community operates through more integrated and organic behaviors, driven by natural and emotional connections, while society functions from a more segmental and mechanical perspective, emphasizing rationality and deliberate actions (Wirth, 1926), and relationships that are often contractual and impersonal. Tönnies categorizes communities into three types of associations: (i) those based on blood relations, referring to relationships founded on kinship and biological connections, such as families; (ii) those based on spatial/geographic proximity, where people share physical space and interact with each other due to their closeness; and (iii) those based on spiritual nearness, founded on common interests and goals, independent of the other two types of communities, with examples including religious affiliations (Paruzzo; Volpato, 2009).

These theoretical perspectives, rooted in the work of various sociology authors, provide a foundational understanding of how the concept of community may contribute to inform humanitarian action. In emergency contexts, it is crucial to acknowledge the varied forms of community associations in order to devise and implement effective strategies that harness the distinct dynamics of each involved group. This approach facilitates a more flexible response,

necessitating aid methodologies that account for holistic contextual nuances where the understanding of community can vary and must be tailored to their specific needs. For instance, considering Tönnies' perspective, in certain situations, an approach to aid centered on familial bonds may be more pertinent than one focused solely on spiritual affiliation.

While humanitarian initiatives typically adhere to a standardized concept of community that may vary between organizations but is uniformly applied across all their interventions, customizing this concept to better address specific contexts – or 'segment of reality' in a more restricted manner - through dialogue with communities about their social organization and identities, can greatly enhance the coherence and effectiveness of aid efforts. This approach exemplifies a more holistic and pluralistic understanding and responsiveness to the diverse communities they aim to assist. The UNHCR's 'UNHCR Manual on a Community-Based Approach in UNHCR Operations' defines community based on common interests, shared identities, and similarities among its members. The organization underscores communities as being:

> A group of people that recognizes itself or is recognized by outsiders as sharing common cultural, religious, or other social features, backgrounds, and interests, and that forms a collective identity with shared goals. However, what is externally perceived as a community might in fact be an entity with many sub-groups or communities. It might be inclusive and protective of its members; but it might also be socially controlling, making it difficult for sub-groups, particularly minorities and marginalized groups, to express their opinions and claim their rights' (UNHCR, 2008, p.14).

It is interesting to note that, in this case, while 'refugees' may be perceived as part of a 'temporary community,' they are far from being a homogeneous group. Instead, they consist of distinct subgroups with individual characteristics and interests shaped by their specific circumstances, extending beyond common concerns related to the right to seek and enjoy asylum. This observation underscores that communities can be defined by shared identities, interests, or circumstances that transcend physical proximity. It illustrates the diverse ways in which communities can form and function, demonstrating that they are not necessarily confined to traditional geographical boundaries. However, it also underscores the complexity of identity within refugee communities, highlighting the dynamic and multifaceted ways in which individuals perceive themselves and interact with others not only within these groups but also within host communities.

Another humanitarian actor, Action Aid, in their 'Safety with Dignity: A Field Manual for Integrating Community-Based Protection Across Humanitarian Programs' highlights communities as constituted by 'individuals, families, friends, colleagues, social groups, local media, CBOs, social services, local charities, and religious institutions' (ActionAid, 2010, p.15). While this concept is broad, its application in the field faces significant challenges, especially concerning the methodologies used for aid response across diverse scenarios. Within this perspective, the definition of community is shaped not merely by inherent characteristics but by the types of social organizations it encompasses, which introduces additional complexity that requires clarification. In practical terms, it is crucial to establish clear criteria for distinguishing between different types of groups, such as friends and colleagues, which may overlap, or in other cases, such as the term family, whose definition may vary depending on the context. This clarity is essential for effectively coordinating aid responses and avoiding duplication of efforts and data.

Furthermore, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's 'A Red Cross Red Crescent Guide to Community Engagement and Accountability' handbook uses the term 'community' to refer to 'the group of people affected by the organization's activities, programmes, or operations – including those who receive support and those who don't. The community can be defined geographically or by personal characteristics, such as age, gender, or status (e.g., pregnant women)'. It also refers to 'all the diverse groups who make up a community, including women, men, boys, and girls, older persons, people with disabilities, different ethnic groups, sexual and gender minorities and marginalized or at-risk groups. Also includes community representatives, such as local leaders, organizations, and authorities' (IFRC, 2021, p.12), and their wide range of needs, capacities, and risks.

This definition primarily focuses on individual specificities rather than broader social groups, potentially overlooking the complex social dynamics and interactions that form communities. It also fails to account for the collective identities and social bonds that are essential for effective engagement. Consequently, this narrow focus undermines the primary aim of community-based programs: to promote participation, empowerment, and resilience within communities. These programs are designed to foster a collective sense of responsibility towards social protection and to achieve community integration by addressing their own identified challenges and interests.

To better explore the paradoxes within this framework, the next section examines Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) and transparency mechanisms. The aim is to identify both contemporary best practices and key challenges, along with lessons learned. Best practices include using mobile technologies for real-time feedback collection, establishing Community Committees actively involved in decision-making processes, and maintaining transparency in reporting intervention progress. However, the practical implementation of AAP can face several challenges, including cultural barriers, communication difficulties, and the need to tailor feedback mechanisms to different community realities.

Such analysis is crucial for ensuring ethical and effective practices within these interventions and for better understanding the main challenges in community-based interventions within contemporary humanitarian design and programming (OCHA, 2020). AAP serves as a tool to evaluate the collective performance of humanitarian personnel, assess their responsiveness to accountability, and scrutinize the implementation - or lack thereof - of prioritizing community involvement, thereby enhancing aid initiatives. When well applied, AAP becomes a crucial mechanism for effective, and context-based, community-based approaches. It aims to enable the identification and understanding of community needs and concerns, thereby refining humanitarian responses accordingly.

3.3 Enhancing community engagement in humanitarian action: addressing accountability to affected people, transparency, and feedback mechanisms

The Collective Accountability to Affected People (AAP) framework is a strategy developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to guide operational efforts to 'improve the quality, accountability and effectiveness of the humanitarian response, in support of local and national systems, to deliver a more responsive and people-centred action' (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023, p.1). It aims to promote a coordinated approach to community engagement and participation through six key outcomes: (i) contingency planning and preparedness; (ii) needs assessment and analysis; (iii) strategic planning; (iv) resource mobilization; and (v) implementation and monitoring (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023).

First, community engagement in pre-crisis assessment and response planning involves evaluating the setting in collaboration with various stakeholders to triangulate data for information

provision. Second, coordinated needs assessment and analysis include sharing data and information during evaluations of the crisis-affected context. Third, involving affected people in preparedness and planning phases contribute to empower community-based representatives, facilitate preparation based on community feedback, and develop collective data management. Additionally, the framework underscores the importance of funding and resources allocation to support engagement with affected people, emphasizing the need for advocacy with donors as part of quality programming. It is considered crucial to implement coordinated monitoring means that systematically evaluate feedback and assess the impact of humanitarian initiatives. This outcome enables timely program adjustments and corrections informed by community reactions (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023).

Lastly, the evaluation and review of collective AAP actions emphasize coordinated transparency to assess overall performance in aid delivery and derive insights from the outcomes of these initiatives. The aim is to determine how well the actions have achieved their goals and to learn from both the positive and negative outcomes of the programs implemented. This involves sharing findings and lessons learned with affected individuals, communities, and other stakeholders. The Collective Accountability to Affected People (AAP) framework and its six outcomes underscores the necessity of involving communities to ensure that their needs and expectations are adequately addressed. It emphasizes the importance of involving directly affected people and crisis-affected communities in decision-making processes at all stages of the aid response (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2023) to fundamentally respect their dignity while identifying and leveraging their expertise and capabilities, which in turn helps refine humanitarian action accordingly. We consider AAP as a crucial mechanism for effective contemporary community-based approach. Through robust accountability, transparency, and feedback mechanisms – indicators considered crucial to the theme –, aid efforts can be strengthened, resulting in a more comprehensive and inclusive response.

Accountability is 'the process of using power responsibly, and taking account of and being held accountable by different stakeholders, primarily those who are affected by the exercise of such power' (Core Humanitarian Standard, 2024, p.16). The rationale behind accountability in aid delivery encompasses two main elements. The first is the moral argument, rooted in compliance with humanitarian principles, emphasizing the ethical obligation to uphold the humanitarian space across all facets of a response. The second element is the belief that improved accountability

enhances performance and impact in humanitarian projects, suggesting that it can yield better outcomes and enhance the security of aid personnel by fostering closer collaboration with affected communities. This dual focus on moral and practical considerations is complemented by a responsibility towards donors. Donors are concerned not only with ethical compliance but also with the effectiveness of their financial contributions. They expect that the funds provided are used efficiently and result in tangible impacts. Thus, the comprehensive nature of accountability is supported by both internal principles and external expectations, ensuring ethical integrity and operational efficiency (Knox-Clarke; Mitchell, 2011).

In the aid scheme, the proliferation of accountability mechanisms has created a complex landscape, which arises from diverse approaches and methods of data collection and provision. For example, irresponsible data management and overlapping information can lead to redundancy, compromising the effectiveness of aid responses and jeopardizing the integrity of coordination within the humanitarian system. Interesting to notice, however, is that 'in some ways, humanitarian accountability is becoming the victim of its own success' (Knox-Clarke; Mitchell, 2011, p.4). Considering this, another concern is that as accountability mechanisms become more widely accessible, interpretations may vary due to diverging interests among key stakeholders. This variability can complicate decision-making processes, hinder coordination, and diminish the overall effectiveness of aid efforts. For example, aid organizations often encounter challenges in balancing the expectations of donors with the needs of the communities they serve, which may not always align. Ensuring transparency in their operations is crucial for stakeholders to understand how aid is delivered, thereby building trust, maintaining credibility, and fostering effective partnerships (Wisheart; Cavender, 2011).

Exactly the opposite of accountability can be found in the concept of corruption, which is defined by Transparency International (TI) as 'the abuse of entrusted power for private gain'. The organization specifically tackles this issue in humanitarian complex emergencies, where, according to TI (2016, p.2), there are weak rule of law and inefficient public institutions, and 'principles of transparency and accountability are unknown, poorly understood, or only given lip service'. Corruption is driven by several factors and poses risks across different phases of humanitarian programming. It can manifest in situations such as resource allocation, misappropriation of funds, and the selection of partners and beneficiaries based on specific interests unrelated to the humanitarian response itself. In the 2022 Annual Report by Ground Truth

Solutions, based on analysis and community recommendations from conversations with 13,000 people across 14 countries, it is highlighted that 'transparency is overwhelmingly wanted and almost always absent' (Group Truth Solutions, 2022, p.24), despite the extent to which aid providers claim to address this issue. The report highlights that despite aid organizations professing to be 'people-centered,' many of those they assist frequently lack clarity regarding what to expect from humanitarian actors. This communication gap not only erodes trust but also complicates efforts to hold organizations accountable (Ground Truth Solutions, 2022).

From another important perspective on transparency, humanitarian organizations are challenged to carefully weigh the structural implications of their decisions when confronted with specific environmental conditions. For example, navigating requests to pay illegal taxes, particularly in armed conflict contexts where such payments may be necessary to access regions controlled by checkpoint guards, presents a complex ethical dilemma. While compliance may seem imperative for operational access, such payments can inadvertently fuel corruption, paradoxically worsening human suffering (Larché, 2011). Considering this, simultaneously, 'relief supplies themselves could become part of a self-sustaining war economy' (Duffield, 2001, p.80). Overall, such discussion is integral to the broader consequentialist debate in aid delivery known as the 'dark side of humanitarian action' (Weiss, 1999, p.12-13), a concern surrounding the new humanitarian paradigm, in contrast with the classical proponents, behind the alliance to the Do no Harm principle. It encompasses scenarios like 'elites that have benefited from the relief economy (for example, in Bosnia)', and 'food and other aid usurped by belligerents to sustain a war economy (for example, in Liberia)' (Weiss, 1999, p.12-13).

Interestingly, one anti-corruption strategy involves the implementation of Feedback, Complaints, and Response Mechanisms (FCRM) for affected individuals and communities. This is crucial because when corruption infiltrates aid processes, it can – directly or indirectly - delay or deny essential services to those in dire need (Transparency International, 2016). Within the scope of the Collective Accountability to Affected People (AAP) framework, 'complaints are an expression of discontent or dissatisfaction in the face of an adverse event. It is a criticism that needs an answer and requires a change' (Inter-Agency Standing Committee Turkey, 2022, p.7). It can be divided into sensitive complaints, which may involve acts of fraud or corruption that violate an aid organization's code of conduct. And non-sensitive complaints, which 'include feedback about the quality or implementation of programmes, projects or services. Such complaints can also

be related to decisions taken by the organization regarding implementation of projects' (Inter-Agency Standing Committee Turkey, 2022, p. 8).

Establishing effective feedback and complaints mechanisms across humanitarian action can pose several challenges. For instance, people may feel disappointed if they perceive that the organization fails to respond adequately to their feedback. An example is when a community requests initiatives that are beyond the organization's mandate. Additionally, providing follow-up can be challenging, especially in insecure locations where communities may fear that complaining about aid delivery programs could jeopardize future assistance. This fear can lead to a lack of honest feedback, making it difficult for aid organizations to assess and improve their programs effectively. During the implementation process, it is crucial for aid staff to ensure that accountability, feedback, complaints, and response mechanisms are clearly understood by the affected individuals (Bainbridge, 2011). The effectiveness of humanitarian delivery, particularly when using a community-based approach that leads to more accurate assessments and better program adjustments, is significantly influenced by how these mechanisms are conducted by humanitarian personnel and perceived by the assisted groups.

Despite their essential nature, the intentions and objectives behind these efforts often face implementation challenges. Current humanitarian emergencies necessitate a nuanced approach that not only recognizes the inherent complexities but also conducts sensitivity analyses to ensure ethical and effective responses. The so-called people-centered approach relies on establishing robust channels for community input, ensuring their voices are not only heard but also acted upon to address their concerns meaningfully. This requires active participation from diverse stakeholders and the establishment of rigorous criteria for designing and employing aid programs, moving beyond mere procedural adherence. Acknowledging discrepancies between intentions and outcomes in the field is important for refining practices and achieving genuine impact. For this, however, requires more than community participation; it necessitates self-criticism from humanitarian actors actively engaged in the field.

To advance this investigation, the next chapter delves into the application of community-based approaches in Afghanistan. Our goal is to highlight the challenges and contradictions specific to this context, drawing on insights from the preceding sections. We emphasize the need for context-specific and needs-based aid initiatives. Understanding Afghanistan's unique political and social landscape is essential for fostering genuine community involvement and delivering aid

in a more decolonial manner. This Chapter aims to address gaps, seize opportunities, and confront challenges in responding to humanitarian needs during complex emergencies. Additionally, it seeks to provide practical insights to enhance the relevance and impact of humanitarian action in settings affected by non-state armed conflicts.

4. CONTEXTUALIZED HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING: COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH IN AFGHANISTAN

In this Chapter, we investigate the implementation of community-based approaches in Afghanistan, focusing on two key areas. First, we provide a thorough analysis of the historical context, covering three significant waves of conflict: the Soviet invasion, the rise of the Taliban, and the U.S.-declared War on Terror following the September 11, 2001, events. We also explore the country's complex social structures, ethnic diversity, and cultural particularities. This historical and socio-cultural backdrop is crucial for understanding Afghanistan's humanitarian needs and landscape, which complements our overall study. In addition to that, we examine the politicization of humanitarian action and its impact on aid delivery in the country. This discussion builds on the theoretical-critical perspectives on new (or liberal) humanitarianism presented in the second Chapter. By addressing the limitations of a liberal-democratic perspective in humanitarian efforts, we contribute to ongoing debates in Humanitarian Action studies and Critical Security Studies, using Afghanistan as a case study.

Second, to analyze community-based approaches in this context, we examine the results from the Afghanistan Community Voices and Accountability Platform, utilizing 2023 data from the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Afghanistan Working Group. This Platform collects feedback from communities on aid delivery across four periods throughout the year, offering analytical insights into the effectiveness and challenges of humanitarian interventions in the region. This data analysis is crucial for reinforcing the theoretical-critical arguments presented previously. It not only underscores the importance and relevance of international aid delivery in Afghanistan but also identifies key areas for improvement in humanitarian practices. Afghanistan serves as a compelling example of how community-led and self-help initiatives, and mediation efforts, can operate within complex emergencies. A notable aspect of this approach is the direct engagement of local communities with armed actors to foster compromise and participation, aimed at reducing harm to civilians. It seeks to empower communities by recognizing them as pivotal

actors in safeguarding their members. A key component of this approach is addressing gender-based violence (GBV). For example, in 2017, the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) facilitated the establishment of gender-inclusive Community Civilian Protection Councils (CCPC/*shuras*) in Baghlan and Kandahar. These Councils, led by community leaders, aimed to 'identify the most urgent protection needs of civilians in areas experiencing armed conflict and to build their advocacy capacity using IHL and Islamic law to engage with both pro- and anti-government forces' (Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2019, p. 3).

The previous Chapters in this thesis are crucial for continuing our analysis, as they provide an introductory foundation for understanding the significant debate about universalism versus localism in aid delivery and international human protection. Considering this, it contributes to developing a more holistic and nuanced foundation when considering the particularities of contemporary humanitarian action when it comes to the particularities of non-western countries. While universalist perspectives often emphasize broad standardized principles, the localism debate, enriched by sociological insights, underlines the distinct characteristics of communities and the importance of considering the intrinsic pluralism of different contexts.

This focus is pivotal in fostering genuine, inclusive dialogues, highlighting the importance of community-based initiatives in creating more context-oriented responses to better meet the needs of crisis-affected individuals and groups, ideally enhancing the overall efficacy of contemporary humanitarian action. Afghanistan provides a compelling case study for examining the intersections of 'global' norms with local realities, highlighting its unique characteristics and the multifaceted concerns of its populations. This is particularly pertinent given the complexities of conflict zones and non-western contexts.

Over four decades of conflict, Afghanistan has heavily relied on international humanitarian aid, sparking intense debates and critiques over the ethical and operational procedures of contemporary aid delivery. It serves as a critical case study illustrating a primary challenge in contemporary humanitarian action: effectively achieving the fundamental goals of alleviating human suffering and ensuring minimal standards of dignity and well-being for its people. Despite extensive multisectoral humanitarian efforts, Afghanistan continues to confront severe challenges. These include critical health and nutrition needs, inadequate access to essential services like clean water, and difficulties in accessing education for children, particularly girls. Furthermore, Afghanistan faces a substantial population of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), insufficient

investment in infrastructure, and limited resources for communities dependent on agriculture (OCHA, 2023b).

Moreover, the country stands at the frontline of climate change hazards, exacerbating these needs, particularly in vulnerable areas susceptible to earthquakes that demand substantial infrastructure adaptation. Security concerns also remain paramount, particularly due to actions by non-state armed groups, especially the Taliban, which pose significant risks to the safety and well-being of the population combined with increased shelter needs. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable, facing heightened protection needs amid policies that often restrict their rights. Additionally, various ethnic and religious groups, such as the Hazara community[3], endure ongoing risks of violence, discrimination, and marginalization (OCHA, 2023b). In addressing these multifaceted challenges, as will be further explored in the following section, Afghanistan exemplifies the intricate landscape of aid delivery and underscores the urgent need for both coordinated efforts and a sensitivity to the context constructed around the humanitarian program cycle. This cycle, encompassing humanitarian needs assessment, response planning, implementation, and monitoring (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2015), is crucial, and it emphasizes the necessity for aid initiatives to be accountable, transparent, and inclusive of feedback mechanisms throughout their design and implementation phases.

This holistic approach not only holds the potential to enhance the effectiveness of contemporary humanitarian action but also integrates community-based approaches, including robust community engagement mechanisms that are attuned to the local context and social dynamics, especially within intricate scenarios involving non-state armed groups. By focusing on these principles, humanitarian actors can (ideally) navigate the complexities of such emergencies more effectively. This perspective stresses the importance of aligning aid efforts with the specific needs and vulnerabilities of the affected population.

In light of this, and building on our discussions from the previous two Chapters, we further examine the discrepancies between the operational guidelines outlined in manuals and standard procedures and the actual challenges faced by humanitarian organizations on the ground. This

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[3] Under Taliban rule, the Shia Hazara minority community in Afghanistan (comprising approximately 10-15% of the population) faces severe discrimination, violence, and persecution based on their ethnic and religious identity. There is an ongoing debate regarding whether the atrocities perpetrated against them should be classified as genocide. Critics have highlighted the international community's perceived failure to adequately address these persistent human rights violations (Hazara Research Collective, 2020).

includes analyzing the communities' perceptions of the assistance provided. While these guidelines propose optimal practices, the realities in the field frequently present a mix of successes and shortcomings. This highlights the imperative to reassess operational procedures and their conceptual applicability, recognizing that what proves effective in one community context may not necessarily be universally applicable elsewhere. By advancing the discussion on intersectionality theory and practice, this study aims to foster critical self-reflection among humanitarian actors. Afghanistan serves as a case study that highlights the complex challenges of implementing effective humanitarian programming, despite the good intentions and ambitious initiatives. It underscores situations where existing projects, despite their undeniable importance, may prove inadequate or need reassessment, particularly within the backdrop of enduring armed conflicts and growing numbers of vulnerable individuals requiring assistance over extended periods. Given these challenges, our objective is to stimulate a constructive debate on implementing robust humanitarian approaches that are inclusive and responsive to the diverse and evolving needs of affected populations, particularly in non-western settings.

4.1 Afghanistan's overview: humanitarian needs amid of long-standing armed conflicts

Afghanistan, located in South Asia, has a contemporary history marked by repeated security instability, which scholars categorize into three distinct waves of conflict. The first wave is related to the Soviet Union's offensive from 1979 to 1989. The Soviet invasion aimed to support the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had seized power in the 1978 Saur Revolution and sought to transform the region into a communist state. Geopolitically, Afghanistan's strategic location held significant importance during the period of the Cold War, as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) viewed the country as a crucial buffer zone against the perceived spread of United States' influence. In terms of resistance, however, what the Soviet forces did not anticipate was Afghanistan's ability to mobilize and sustain an opposition build by local fighters, known as the *Mujahideen*, or 'holy warriors', fueled by a widespread sense of unity and driven by a code of honor, especially in the early years of the invasion. Another important figure during this time was the United States, who played a pivotal role by providing financial aid and weaponry, such as Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, significantly boosting the resistance's capability to defend against Soviet air attacks (Maley, 2002; Misdaq, 2006).

The impact of this war on the civilian population spanned across various sectors. By 1990, over 6.2 million refugees had fled Afghanistan[4], of whom the majority were in Pakistan and Iran, neighboring states, according to data from the UN Refugee Agency (Colville, 1997 apud Maley, 2002, p.71). The harms also included significant loss of life, widespread trauma, and deterioration of the agricultural sector, crucial for the livelihoods and income of much of the population, in addition to a severely weakened economy struggling to cope with the extensive infrastructure damage. After the Soviets withdrew in 1989 and the fall of the communist government in 1992, internal turmoil continued, leading to the second wave of conflict: the emergence of the Taliban movement. The Taliban occupied Kandahar in November 1994, and by 1996, they had gained power over Kabul (Maley, 2002). By 2001, they controlled more than 90% of the country (European Country of Origin Information Network, n.d.). This group aimed to impose stability amid the ongoing internal struggle for political power and social cohesion. Their pronounced aim was 'to rid the country of warlords, to inaugurate an Islamic system and to hand over power to qualified technocrats and those dedicated to an Islamic system of government' (Misdaq, 2006, p.179).

There are different groups within the Taliban. The leaders, such as the spiritual leader Mullah Omar, were *Mujahideen* during the previous war. Followed by a group formed (or recruited) by *madrassa* (Islamic 'schools' combined with religious ideology) students who had not fought against the Soviets, but 'many were orphans from refugee camps'. In this sense, vulnerable 'victims of the Soviet-Afghan war, and their inadequate socialization in significant measure accounted for their ability to do things which would have been unthinkable in traditional Afghan society, such as rain blows on women in the street' (Maley, 2002, p.224-225). Lastly, the movement also was constituted by *Khalqis*, 'who had joined the Taliban out of ethnic solidarity' (Maley, 2002, p.224-225).

The third wave encompasses the US-declared war on terrorism post the events of 9/11, targeting Al-Qaeda, the Taliban regime, and subsequent other non-state armed groups around the world. The term *Mujahideen* has then come into contemporary discourse as a reference to resistance fighters in Afghanistan and is often used as a generic term to identify

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[4] This influx heightened Pakistan's awareness of Afghanistan's crisis. Refugee issues persist, with the Pakistani government occasionally restricting Afghan entry and ordering expulsions (Hussain, 2023) as part of a policy targeting undocumented Afghans and refugees. The UNHCR's 2023 Global Trends Forced Displacement report notes that '90 percent of all Afghan refugees were hosted in the Islamic Republic of Iran (3.8 million) and Pakistan (2 million)'.

members/practitioners of *jihjjad* (Maley, 2002). These events are some of the fundamental elements that underscore Afghanistan's pivotal role in global security and highlight its complex enduring socio-political sphere. As William Maley (2002, p. 1) succinctly describes, 'Afghanistan is a land of extremes', often referred to as the 'graveyard of empires,' the country has consistently resisted conquest by foreign powers. However, this setting has also contributed to national instability, creating fertile ground for ambitious power-oriented authority figures rooted in extreme and autocratic ideologies, while in a context falling apart into (i) ethnic, (ii) religious and (iii) political segments. Understanding these factors is crucial for comprehending Afghanistan's intricate socio-political landscape.

Firstly, for what concerns (i) ethnicity, it is interesting to mention that this component in Afghanistan has been 'locally viewed as a primary aspect of identity'. This relates to the previously discussed sociological framework in our investigation, correlated to a sense of belonging that may integrate the classification of community itself. In Afghanistan, the component of identity 'is both fixed and changing' (Misdaq, 2006, p. 230), demonstrating a flexible adaptation that can consist into social and situational needs. For example, this fluidity can manifest as survival strategies in contexts where ethnic discrimination prevails, or as aspirations for advancement, particularly among smaller groups striving to enhance their social status (Misdaq, 2006). Afghanistan boasts a rich tapestry of ethnic groups. The *Pashtuns*, the largest, are divided into numerous tribes and sub-tribes. *Tajiks* represent the second-largest unit, followed by the *Hazaras*, an ethnolinguistic group speaking a dialect of Dari called *Hazaragi*. *Uzbeks*, who use a *Turkic* language and are predominantly Sunni Muslims, also constitute a significant portion of the population. Each group has distinct identities and shared interests, with smaller ethnic divisions and linguistic diversity further accentuating Afghanistan's complexity (European Country of Origin Information Network, n.d.).

When it comes to (ii) religion, the country is predominantly Muslim. In Afghanistan, 'resistance was motivated by a range of factors, including calculations of interest, but the power of Islam as a basis of resistance proved of fundamental importance'. Religion can underpin resistance movements in two crucial ways: it can offer a source of moral and spiritual authority, and it can function as an ideological framework that helps to justify and legitimize resistance efforts (Maley, 2002, p. 59). The religious landscape affects both internal social and power dynamics as well as external perceptions of the country, particularly regarding Islamic law.

Specially since 9/11, political narratives have frequently conflated the Taliban and its policies with Islam as a whole (Maley, 2002). This oversimplification is misleading and problematic, attributing extreme interpretations to the entire religion, undermining the multifaceted and nuanced nature of Islamic beliefs and practices.

Additionally, key western concerns in Afghanistan, such as terrorism acts and women's rights, have triggered a response aimed at isolating the Taliban regime and challenging their policies and practices. This response is framed within a public discourse on human protection, aimed at justifying so-called 'moral (or humanitarian) wars' against human rights abuses. In humanitarian action studies, this perspective, known as new (or liberal) humanitarianism, is closely linked to rights-based responses that go beyond emergency relief, encompassing what Fiona Fox (2001, p. 279) calls 'goal-oriented humanitarianism'. This approach signifies a fundamental shift in humanitarian action since the 1990s, emphasizing long-term impact in aid delivery (Fox, 2001). It correlates with the nexus between humanitarianism, peace, and development, aiming to respond to complex emergencies while addressing the root causes of conflict and instability. From this perspective, the 'new humanitarianism is a product of the late-20th-century crisis of the Third World development and it offers new solutions to overcome past failures. Above all new humanitarianism is political' (Fox, 2001, p. 275).

In this part of our research, we are not only addressing the political aspect as an evaluation of Afghanistan's socio-political scenario, as presented at the beginning of this section, but also exploring the implications of the politicization of humanitarian aid itself in this context. Afghanistan serves as a compelling example for this controversial debate, which supports for 'a more politically conscious aid that can assess the present and future impact of aid interventions on the politics of conflict and ensure that aid is linked to military and diplomatic tools in a coherent conflict-resolution strategy' (Fox, 2001, p. 274).

The primary criticism of the new humanitarian model revolves around three main issues. First is the connection between humanitarian relief and development-military agendas, based on the belief that development is crucial for peacebuilding. Critics argue that merging these efforts may detract from the immediate focus on addressing urgent needs. Second, there is significant debate over the principle of neutrality. The new approach often challenges this principle by linking aid not only to need but also to moral judgments about perpetrators and, related to that, often demands for behavioral changes from those responsible for the suffering in the affected areas. This

conditionality for receiving aid is illustrated by gender equality requirements. For example, Oxfam suspended aid projects in Afghanistan to protest the Taliban's restrictions on Afghan female aid workers in 1997 (Atmar, 2001). This initiative neither helped the population in need nor prompted a change in the Taliban's policies against women's rights. Additionally, such a shift can lead to aid being perceived as biased or politically motivated, compromising various aspects of the response. Operationally, it can reduce effectiveness in gaining access to affected areas and, subjectively, it can undermine the perceived ethical integrity of humanitarian efforts.

Lastly, the independence of humanitarian actors can be jeopardized when humanitarian efforts become politicized. This raises a crucial concern: how can humanitarian organizations maintain their autonomy in a field increasingly influenced by political interests - such as development, human rights promotion, and international security - that may also align with the agendas of their own donors (Bandeira, 2022; Fox, 2001; Nascimento, 2015). In Afghanistan, the politicization of humanitarian efforts, despite some successes in certain sectors, ultimately proved counterproductive and unsustainable for human protection. In addition to that, the focus on promoting political-security and human rights agendas failed to address both immediate and long-term needs of the crisis-affected populations in the country, while undermining the perceived neutrality of aid workers and safety of civilians.

While flexible approaches to emergency responses are important and should be adapted to specific contexts, we understand that it is crucial to clearly define and uphold the distinct roles and responsibilities of each actor involved. For example, the mandates of political entities (including those in human rights advocacy) and humanitarian organizations must be clearly delineated, as should the mandates of military forces. Each actor has a specific role and should not interfere with or overlap the responsibilities of others. Clear delineation of these objectives and duties is necessary to ensure a coordinated and effective response.

As the concept of humanitarianism evolves, it broadens its scope to encompass a wider array of concerns and responsibilities, aiming to address social vulnerabilities and ensure no harm is done in aid initiatives. However, using Afghanistan as a case study, we highlight the necessity of a nuanced, context-specific approach to aid. This approach must respect and understand local dynamics while actively engaging with communities to identify and address any shortcomings. Achieving this involves a thorough understanding of the context and the involvement of local populations throughout every phase of a humanitarian project - assessment, design,

implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. A bottom-up approach aims to effectively address the needs of affected populations while balancing global competence with local legitimacy and operational effectiveness.

In terms of security concerns and humanitarian needs overview, Afghanistan has faced significant challenges both before, during, and after the US-led invasion that ousted the Taliban from power in 2001. In terms of security, despite the initial removal of the Taliban in 2001, the group was never fully disbanded. This failure, compounded by a poorly strategized withdrawal of international forces, contributed to the Taliban's rapid resurgence as the De-facto Authorities (DfA) in 2021. Additionally, the lack of attention to other major causes of disputes undermines the sustainability of responses to the conflict. According to Oxfam, the top three causes of disputes in Afghanistan are land, water, and family issues, which are aspects that have not been adequately addressed due to a lack of operational mechanisms or resources, or genuine knowledge or interest in understanding the broader context beyond the Taliban in the country (Waldman, 2008, p. 9). In the same study, Oxfam presents that while the Taliban is identified as the greatest threat, it is closely followed by warlords and criminals (Waldman, 2008, p. 12). This matters because 'many Afghans claim that in the name of fighting the Taliban, the west is ignoring abuses committed by its Afghan proxies'. Consequently, warlords and militia commanders commit crimes with impunity, despite allegations of rape, murder, and kidnapping (Baker, 2009, n.d.).
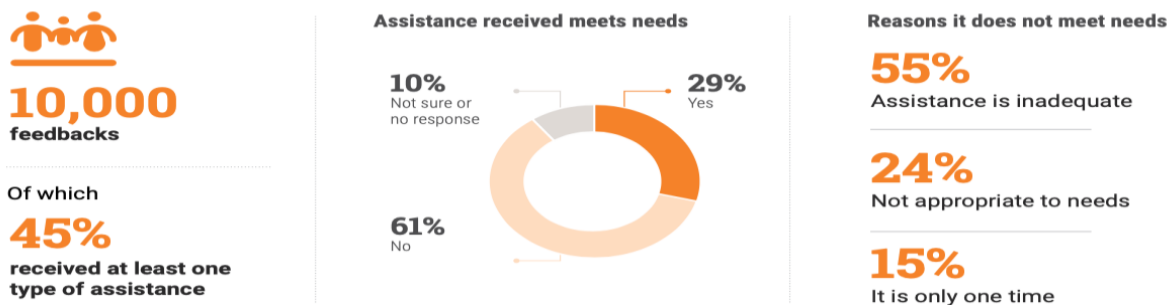
According to the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for Afghanistan (2023), 23.7 million people - over half of Afghanistan's population - need assistance, yet only 17.3 million are targeted for life-saving aid. Aid distribution is notably uneven, with a significant concentration around the capital, Kabul (OCHA, 2023). This geographic disparity severely hampers response efforts, disproportionately impacting rural areas where the most vulnerable populations reside. The challenges include limited infrastructure, especially in mountainous regions, restricted access imposed by conflicting parties, and systematic insecurity affecting aid workers and civilians. These factors contribute to inadequate humanitarian coverage in these critical areas. In some countries, aid workers are deliberately targeted and caught in the crossfire. Consequently, 'in Afghanistan, as attacks on aid workers increased and became volatile, aid worker presence reduced' (IFRC, 2018, p.65).

Rural areas exhibit significantly higher needs for food (91%), healthcare (46%), and livelihood support (42%) compared to urban locations where these percentages are 83%, 60%, and

31% respectively (OCHA, 2023, p.15). Particularly concerning vulnerable groups, nearly 80% of those in need are women and children, underscoring the challenges they face in a country ranked 170th out of 170 for women's inclusion, justice, and security (International Rescue Committee, 2023b). Another important issue is the evident dissatisfaction with the general assistance provided, which underscores the need for better Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) in humanitarian responses. In Afghanistan, the AAP Working Group facilitates inter-agency collaboration to implement and monitor community feedback through the Afghanistan Community Voices and Accountability Platform. Key AAP components include real-time community validation, gender-responsive AAP mechanisms, and continuous community feedback (OCHA, 2023, p.31). As illustrated in Figure 1, data indicates that out of 10,000 feedback responses, 61% reported that the assistance received did not meet their needs, with 55% attributing this to inadequate assistance.

Figure 1. Satisfaction with assistance received – based on feedback mechanisms

Satisfaction with assistance received
based on feedback mechanisms

10,000 feedbacks

Of which
45% received at least one type of assistance

Assistance received meets needs

10% Not sure or no response

29% Yes

61% No

Reasons it does not meet needs

55% Assistance is inadequate

24% Not appropriate to needs

15% It is only one time

Reference: OCHA (2023, p.30)

As previously noted, this mechanism is a crucial component of a community-based approach. However, a significant challenge with this AAP tool is the lack of effective follow-up on the insights gathered. While collecting data on dissatisfaction is valuable, it is insufficient on its own. The true impact depends on how this information is used. Therefore, it is essential not only to gather data but also to apply it strategically to drive meaningful improvements in the assistance provided. In the next section, we will examine the Community Voices and Accountability Platform for community engagement in Afghanistan. Our objective is to analyze

the existing community feedback on humanitarian programming in the country with a focus on evaluation processes and reflect on the views of crises-affected people.

4.2 Community Voices and Accountability Platform: analyzing feedback and accountability mechanisms in humanitarian programming in Afghanistan

Community Voices and Accountability Platform is an inter-agency initiative focused on community engagement and accountability for those affected by humanitarian emergencies in Afghanistan. The Platform gathers insights and feedback from communities to provide aid organizations with comprehensive information, allowing them to observe and evaluate the perceived effectiveness of aid responses in this context, ultimately helping to improve the quality of services. By leveraging feedback mechanisms, which include community perceptions and complaints, the Platform aims to design better humanitarian programs and improve their implementation, monitoring, and evaluation phases, while adopting the Do no Harm principle.

It is important to note that 'the results offer a snapshot of a non-representative population of Afghanistan and should be considered indicative only' (UNFPA, 2024, n.d). Despite this limitation, the findings substantiate two key aspects of our analysis. Firstly, the feedback reveals the alignment - or lack thereof - between the objectives of aid personnel and the actual services delivered. This discrepancy is essential for understanding the gap between the aid provided and the growing needs over time, revealing a significant paradox and raising concerns about whether aid reaches those who need it most. Additionally, the feedback emphasizes Afghanistan's unique context, reinforcing the argument that humanitarian efforts should adopt a cross-cultural and bottom-up approach rather than a top-down, standardized perspectives.
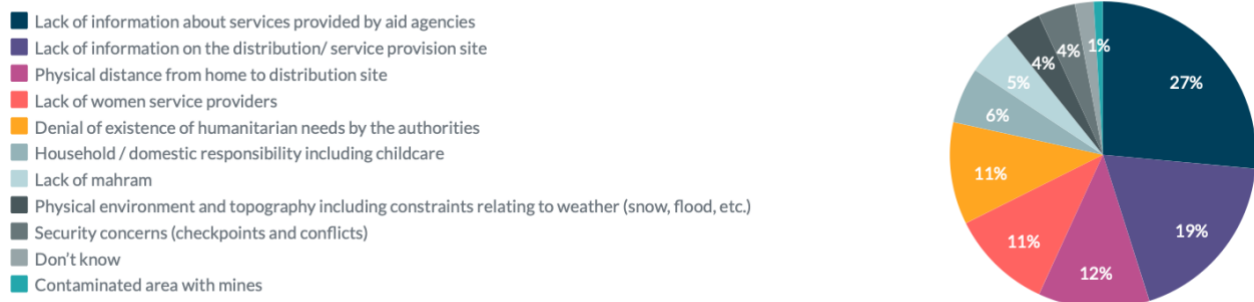
Our analysis is based on the 2023 results from the Afghanistan AAP Working Group, which includes data collected from the Community Voices and Accountability Platform across four periods during this year. Specifically, the feedback comprises 2,010 responses in the first quarter (Q1 – from January to March 2023), 4,282 in the second quarter (Q2 – from April to June 2023), 10,005 in the third quarter (Q3 – from July to September 2023), and 29,294 in the fourth quarter (Q4 – from October to December 2023). Regarding the results, it is noteworthy that community feedback across all four quarters consistently highlights a growing need for assistance in Afghanistan. The concerns mentioned include essential services such as food assistance, which is ranked as the highest priority in humanitarian services in the country, along with health care and

clean water (UNFPAb, 2024). Some respondents also reported a reduction in aid, noting that it no longer adequately meets their families' needs or provides for their basic requirements, particularly in rural areas, as stressed in Q2, pointing: 'those who live in rural areas expressed more need of these services for their communities' (UNFPAb, 2024, n.d).

The reduction in funding for the aid sector in Afghanistan have been a significant concern raised by various humanitarian actors over the years. More recent, for instance, the International Rescue Committee (2023, n.d) notes that only '23% of required funds for this year's humanitarian response plan have been received, compared to 40% this time last year, and this underfunding has contributed to the response reaching two million fewer people during January - April compared to the same period last year' in 2022. This situation underscores how underfunding is severely limiting the ability of humanitarian organizations to provide adequate assistance. At the same time, additional funding is necessary to enable international aid organizations to support local partners and implement their initiatives effectively. This requires greater donor flexibility to overcome various bureaucratic constraints, particularly through more adaptable funding mechanisms that can help maximize the positive outcomes of their contributions (OCHA, 2023).

Another crucial aspect, especially highlighted in Q1 and identified as a challenge in accessing humanitarian assistance (refer to Figure 2), is the need for accurate information provision. This issue is further compounded by the physical distance between homes and distribution sites, both of which our study has previously identified as significant operational challenges in aid delivery. This challenge is particularly acute in regions where security concerns add an additional layer of difficulty, as is the case in various areas of Afghanistan. In the category of feedback, the analysis from the Community Voices and Accountability Platform underlines a significant need for accurate information about aid projects. This includes details about the services provided, such as those integrated into livelihood initiatives, including employment and education opportunities. In the education sector, for instance, there is a specific emphasis on gathering information about locations where girls and women, who are particularly vulnerable in this context, can access schools and receive treatment with respect and dignity (UNFPA, 2024, n.d.).

Figure 2. Analysis of negative feedback on assistance received - including adequacy and coverage of needs (Q1)

If not, can you explain why

- Lack of information about services provided by aid agencies
- Lack of information on the distribution/ service provision site
- Physical distance from home to distribution site
- Lack of women service providers
- Denial of existence of humanitarian needs by the authorities
- Household / domestic responsibility including childcare
- Lack of mahram
- Physical environment and topography including constraints relating to weather (snow, flood, etc.)
- Security concerns (checkpoints and conflicts)
- Don't know
- Contaminated area with mines

Reference: UNFPA (2024, n.d)

The analysis of the feedback highlights the critical need for gender-sensitive protection approaches across all areas of humanitarian programming. The situation in Afghanistan has impacted both vulnerable girls and women, as well as female aid personnel. The Taliban's gradual ban on female aid workers – officialized by the 24 December 2022 directive, which prohibits women from working for national or international NGOs - poses a significant challenge to delivering humanitarian assistance. This restriction severely hampers efforts to reach beneficiaries and underscores the need for effective strategies to address gender-related barriers in aid delivery (UN Women, 2023). Humanitarian organizations already rarely provide gender-specific assistance, and this ban only adds another layer of difficulty.

This ban further compromises the response efforts in the country, considering that, as Global Truth Solutions (2023, n.d.) aptly notes, 'men do not always know the needs of women and girls and as such are not an appropriate source of information'. In this context, there is an operational concern about whether feedback and complaints platforms are effectively designed to reach and serve these groups. One notable gap, however, is that humanitarian organizations 'often lack the capacity, knowledge, and resources to adequately design and implement such programming' aimed at assisting and protecting girls and women (Ground Truth Solutions, 2023, n.d).

The analysis of feedback results also highlights the importance of integrating gender protection strategies into all aspects of humanitarian programming in Afghanistan. While acknowledging the context-specific limitations within the country, it is evident that the challenges in humanitarian action also have a methodological dimension. Effective responses must be

adaptable and flexible, considering the region's unique characteristics. This approach may involve engaging in cross-cultural dialogue and negotiation mechanisms with both local communities and non-state armed actors. In these interactions, humanitarian actors can serve facilitators, upholding principles of neutrality and independence to ensure the effectiveness and integrity of their efforts. This approach also allows space for community-driven and self-help initiatives, empowering community members to play a central role in shaping their own futures.

Regarding the concerns of vulnerable groups within the Community Voices and Accountability Platform, there is notable reaction to the criteria used to identify them. This is particularly interesting because it highlights the need for a clear definition of vulnerability to effectively reach those in need. It also reveals significant concerns about the transparency of these processes, especially in terms of beneficiary selection. In this context, Q4 underscores the necessity for greater attention to ensure that no vulnerable groups are overlooked. This also emphasizes the importance of involving community focal points to clearly communicate the selection criteria to community members, a concern also raised in Q1. At the same time, however, Q1 underlines that communication should not be limited to interactions with community leaders alone but should instead involve broader community engagement efforts (UNFPA, 2024, n.d). The idea is that these approaches are complementary and should work together to enhance overall outreach and effectiveness, ensuring that individuals and vulnerable groups receive the specific humanitarian assistance to which they are entitled (UNFPA, 2024; UNFPAd).

When it comes to the themes of information, protection initiatives for vulnerable groups, and eligibility criteria, these are frequently mentioned as essential components the community needs from aid providers, as evidenced in Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6. Interestingly, across all quarters, the most cited source of information provision was 'face-to-face communication with aid workers', followed by family, friends and neighbors (Q4), mosque (Q2), and community leaders (Q3). This preference stands out against the backdrop of the increasing trend towards digitalizing information delivery in aid initiatives. However, as highlighted in this research, the use of digital tools can be counterproductive if not implemented effectively.

For instance, providing online mechanisms for accessing information and lodging complaints may not be practical in areas with limited internet access. Similarly, the provision of

information in multiple languages[5] is crucial for effectively reaching community members and ensure their participation in various phases of humanitarian initiatives. This underscores the need to tailor information delivery methods to the specific needs and capabilities of each community (UNFPA, 2024; UNFPA, 2024b; UNFPA, 2024c; UNFPA, 2024d).
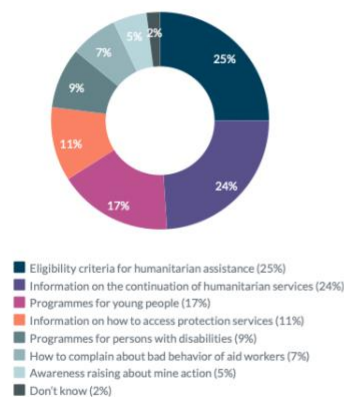
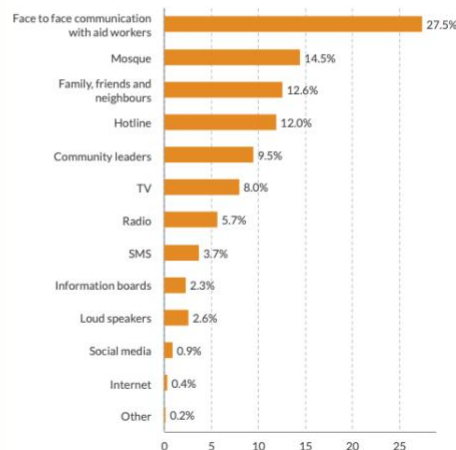**Figure 3.** Analysis of type of information needed now (Q1)
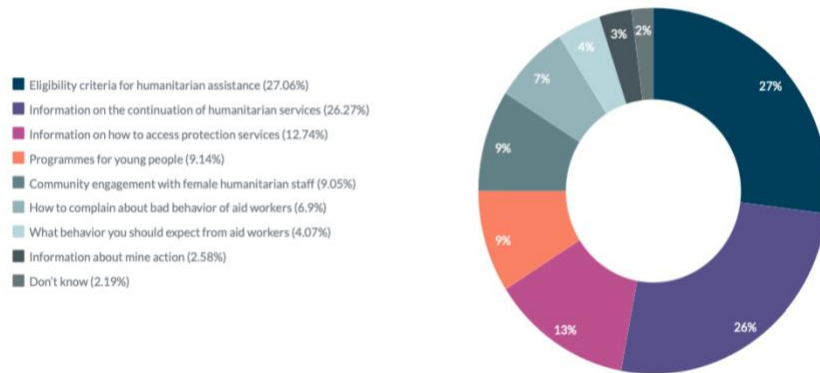
Reference: UNFPA (2024, n.d)

Figure 4. Analysis of type of information needed now and sources of information (Q2)
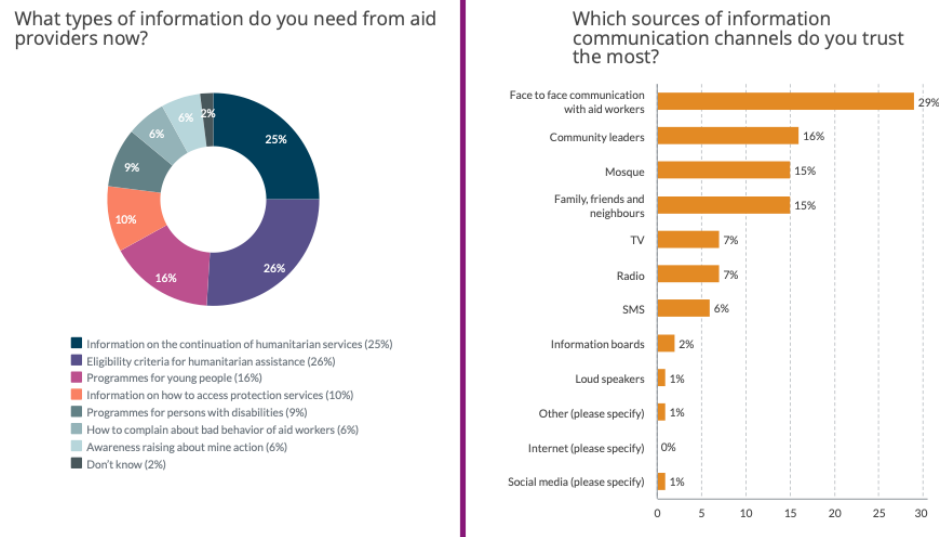

Reference: UNFPA (2024b, n.d).

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[5] When it comes to the Afghanistan Community Voices and Accountability Platform – Afghanistan AAP Working Group, 'the questionnaires/common data points will be available in English, Dari, and Pashto. The responses from communities (feedback data) submitted in Dari and Pashto will be translated into English on a regular basis' (UNFPA, 2024, p.3).
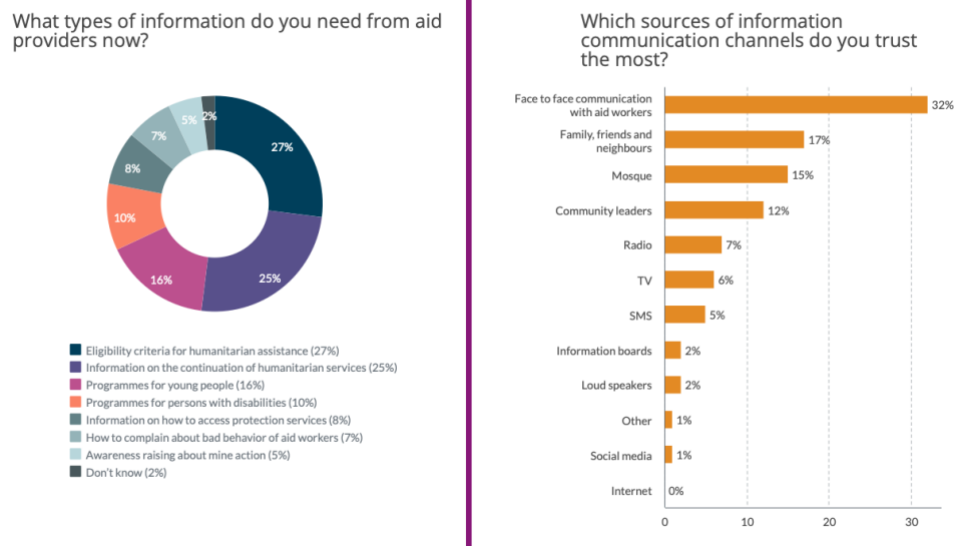
Figure 5. Analysis of type of information needed now and sources of information (Q3)

What types of information do you need from aid providers now?

- Information on the continuation of humanitarian services (25%)
- Eligibility criteria for humanitarian assistance (26%)
- Programmes for young people (16%)
- Information on how to access protection services (10%)
- Programmes for persons with disabilities (9%)
- How to complain about bad behavior of aid workers (6%)
- Awareness raising about mine action (6%)
- Don't know (2%)

Which sources of information communication channels do you trust the most?

Source	%
Face to face communication with aid workers	29%
Community leaders	16%
Mosque	15%
Family, friends and neighbours	15%
TV	7%
Radio	7%
SMS	6%
Information boards	2%
Loud speakers	1%
Other (please specify)	1%
Internet (please specify)	0%
Social media (please specify)	1%

Reference: UNFPA (2024c, n.d)

Figure 6. Analysis of type of information needed now and sources of information (Q4)

What types of information do you need from aid providers now?

- Eligibility criteria for humanitarian assistance (27%)
- Information on the continuation of humanitarian services (25%)
- Programmes for young people (16%)
- Programmes for persons with disabilities (10%)
- Information on how to access protection services (8%)
- How to complain about bad behavior of aid workers (7%)
- Awareness raising about mine action (5%)
- Don't know (2%)

Which sources of information communication channels do you trust the most?

Source	%
Face to face communication with aid workers	32%
Family, friends and neighbours	17%
Mosque	15%
Community leaders	12%
Radio	7%
TV	6%
SMS	5%
Information boards	2%
Loud speakers	2%
Other	1%
Social media	1%
Internet	0%

Reference: UNFPA (2024d, n.d)

The feedback analysis from the Afghanistan Community and Accountability Platform highlights several key points essential for self-criticism in contemporary humanitarian action, especially in the context of non-state armed conflicts. For instance, while communities acknowledge and appreciate the aid provided in Afghanistan, they also raise concerns that 'the

quality of assistance is not good and/or does not meet the basic needs of the affected people' (UNFPA, 2024, n.d.). Additionally, Q2 emphasizes that 'ongoing humanitarian programmes should be tailored to the needs and priorities of the affected communities' (UNFPAb, 2024, n.d.).

Both concerns highlight a gap between community needs and the adherence of aid organizations to the criteria established by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) for aid delivery, as outlined by the Platform. The criteria include a particular focus on: '(1) needs-based response, (2) methods of response, (3) staffing, (4) minimal AAP standards, (5) prioritizing gender-responsive programming' (UNFPA, 2024, p.1). Despite these established elements, our concern lies in the apparent difficulties in effectively implementing and following up on the feedback provided by the consulted communities, as highlighted in this research. Given that the AAP Working Group in Afghanistan, along with its guiding principles and objectives, was established in July 2020 (OCHA, 2020), and considering that the only available online data we have found by the end of this research is from 2023, it is still too early to fully assess the real impact in the field. However, the consulted data reveals a paradox: aid projects in 2023 and prior years, based on information provided by various other aid and human rights actors, have shown that the international humanitarian response frequently failed to meet the population's basic needs in this country. The pressing question is why this is the case. Our research identifies several key issues, including the complexity of the context, the limitations of a democratic-liberal approach inherent in new humanitarianism, concerns about the politicization of humanitarian action, and the need for a more comprehensive, needs-based humanitarian response. A community-based approach emerges as a potential avenue for improvement.

Using Accountability to Affected People (AAP) indicators, which measure the percentage of consulted crisis-affected individuals, is essential for gathering analytical feedback. However, the real impact depends on how these data are utilized to drive necessary changes in aid delivery. The Platform's goals include 'contributing to more principled humanitarian action by shifting power to communities, enabling them to become active participants in their own future and recovery' (UNFPA, 2024, p.2). This aligns with a central argument of this research: the potential for collaborative and coherent response plans, developed in partnership with communities, to drive aid projects toward a more context-based response and decolonial approach. Such a method is crucial for an effective humanitarian response.

For example, our analysis of feedback from the consulted population consistently highlighted additional concerns that are often overlooked by standardized aid projects. One important issue is mental health, which is frequently neglected in humanitarian guidelines and common needs assessments. This oversight is particularly significant in contexts like Afghanistan, where generational trauma and ongoing conflict have resulted in children growing up amid persistent violence. Addressing mental health and psychosocial support, as emphasized by the communities, is crucial for mitigating the severe psychological impacts on affected populations. Furthermore, it presents an opportunity to enhance the overall effectiveness of aid delivery.

The Community Voices and Accountability Platform, as discussed in this section, shows considerable promise for evaluating humanitarian aid delivery. However, our main concern is whether follow-up and self-criticism mechanisms will be effectively adapted based on the feedback received and seriously considered by humanitarian personnel, leading to appropriate adjustments in aid initiatives. Despite these concerns, the platform represents a crucial step toward a more coordinated humanitarian effort, emphasizing information sharing, and a bottom-up approach through dialogue between aid workers and affected communities. This approach is essential for enhancing responsiveness and addresses several key debates in the field, including the dilemmas of power dynamics between those in need and those providing aid. As previously noted, the ultimate goal is to ensure a humanitarian response that collaborates with - rather than acts on behalf of - the communities affected by complex emergencies.

5. CONCLUSION

In this master's thesis, we have examined the primary challenges faced by community-based approaches in humanitarian action and their impact on the effectiveness of aid delivery in Afghanistan. Our investigation delved into contemporary debates surrounding humanitarian practices, integrating insights from theoretical-critical studies on responses in non-western regions and non-state armed conflicts. We highlighted the necessity of self-critique within the aid system while also examining the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing a community-based approach. Using Afghanistan's complex political and social landscape as a case study, we aimed to illuminate the current needs and challenges faced by crisis-affected communities and identify gaps in humanitarian action in this region.

This analysis was complemented by a review of complaints and feedback mechanisms, specifically through the Afghanistan Community Voices and Accountability Platform from the Afghanistan Accountability to Affected People (AAP) Working Group. Our study addressed perceived shortcomings in humanitarian efforts and proposed potential avenues for improvement. We emphasized the need for responsible use of information provided by communities and the necessity for flexibility in incorporating their voices into various phases of humanitarian projects or programs, including assessment, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. We underscored that communities possess an inherent understanding of their realities and prevailing challenges, thus playing a fundamental role in shaping their own futures.

It is important to recognize that humanitarian emergencies have become increasingly unique and multifaceted. While the new humanitarianism of the 1990s aimed to promote and safeguard the well-being of individuals worldwide by integrating development, security, and humanitarian efforts, its effectiveness in addressing today's complexities remains debatable. Paradoxically, the most effective approach may be to adopt a more localized perspective that genuinely understands the specifics of each context and actively engages with affected communities, thereby fostering authentic cross-cultural dialogue. Our research highlights this as a significant step toward making humanitarian efforts more tailored to the specific context and needs of affected groups. This localized approach also paves the way for more decolonial aid delivery, which is essential for addressing issues in the field, such as the inherent power imbalances between aid providers and recipients.

Our investigation initially delved into the new humanitarian paradigm and the issues stemming from an over-reliance on false universalism, particularly within the liberal-democratic model. This model frequently distances itself from localized approaches that are vital for effective community-based initiatives. This disconnect becomes evident when examining the evolving concept of security, which now includes human security and emphasizes social cohesion and peace from a predominantly western perspective. Similarly, the causes of armed conflicts, such as underdevelopment, often oversimplify the complexities involved, especially in the context of non-state armed conflicts. These issues have been analyzed through Critical Security Studies (CSS) and advanced Humanitarian Action studies. Key issues identified in our investigation into the new humanitarianism approach include the politicization of aid, which often undermines the principle

of neutrality, and the merging of human rights with development goals, which focuses on long-term impact rather than a traditional relief-only approach.

In the context of Afghanistan, it is essential to clearly define and maintain the distinct roles and responsibilities of each actor involved in humanitarian efforts. Specifically, the mandates of political entities, human rights advocates, traditional humanitarian organizations, and military forces must be clearly delineated. Each actor has a specific role and should avoid overlapping or interfering with the responsibilities of others. Clear definitions of these roles are crucial for ensuring a coordinated and effective response. This is especially important when engaging with communities, as vague definitions of humanitarian actors' goals and their perceived ties to larger political entities can jeopardize projects and endanger both humanitarian personnel and the communities they aim to assist.

This forms part of a broader discourse on contemporary humanitarian action, underscoring the limitations inherent in the liberal-democratic perspective that has shaped the development of new humanitarianism since the end of the Cold War. While not the primary focus of our research, this discussion, introduced in the second Chapter, provides initial insights into the challenges faced by community-based approaches. It reveals a lack of self-criticism concerning standardized 'universal' values and methodologies in humanitarian action, which may unintentionally overlook alternative strategies for human protection. We emphasize the need to acknowledge and address community concerns, needs, and vulnerabilities while leveraging their existing capacities, including community-led and self-help initiatives. Such mechanisms can serve as alternatives to informal dispute resolution and highlight the necessity for a shift away from top-down responses. This shift requires a critical reassessment of the humanitarian system, particularly in relation to the limitations of rights-development frameworks. Our research points out that this involves recognizing diverse cultural conceptions of human dignity rather than adhering strictly to western-constructed human rights indicators. Given this, bottom-up mechanisms that emphasize community participation provide a critical alternative to western-centric and one-size-fits-all models, which, according to the data presented in our investigation, have proven counterproductive in alleviating human suffering in contexts such as Afghanistan.

The second part of the thesis explores both community-based approach and community engagement – complementary mechanism; while also delving into the concept of 'community' from a sociological perspective to clarify its implications and potential contributions to the

humanitarian field. Our research explores the implications of using standardized definitions of 'community,' based on an analysis of manuals from the UN Refugee Agency, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and Action Aid. We find that these definitions are often overly simplistic and fail to accurately capture the social structures of the regions these organizations aim to assist. Consequently, we discuss the potential impacts of such conceptualizations on implementing community-based approaches in complex and diverse environments. These standard definitions generally emphasize geographical and demographic factors, while overlooking the intricate social dynamics that shape communities, which can vary widely across different regions and even within a single country.

To address this, we integrate theoretical perspectives from various sociologists to offer a more nuanced understanding of 'community,' tailored to local contexts. In emergency situations, recognizing the diverse forms of community associations is crucial for developing effective strategies that leverage the unique dynamics of each group. This perspective requires flexible aid methodologies that account for the holistic and contextual nuances. For example, (as based on Tönnies' theory) aid methodologies that focus on familial bonds, as considered a community, might be more effective in certain contexts than those centered solely on spiritual affiliations. Humanitarian initiatives often rely on a standardized concept of community that varies between organizations but is uniformly applied across their interventions. By customizing this concept to better address specific settings - through dialogue with communities about their social organization and identities - they can (ideally) enhance the coherence and effectiveness of humanitarian efforts.

Finally, we conduct a practical evaluation of the Accountability to Affected People (AAP) framework, which is crucial for implementing a responsive and people-centered community-based approach. Our research reveals that while the proliferation of accountability mechanisms has enhanced transparency, it has also resulted in a complex and fragmented landscape in aid delivery. This complexity arises from varied approaches and methods of data collection, which can result in redundant information and inefficient aid responses. For example, poorly managed data and overlapping information can undermine the effectiveness of aid and disrupt coordination within the humanitarian system. As accountability mechanisms become more widespread, the diversity of interpretations and interests among stakeholders can complicate decision-making processes. Aid organizations often grapple with the challenge of balancing donor expectations with the actual

needs of the communities they serve, which are not always aligned. This misalignment can hinder effective aid delivery and undermine the trust between aid providers and the affected communities.

Interestingly, implementing feedback, complaints, and response mechanisms has proven to be an effective anti-corruption strategy. These mechanisms are closely linked to community engagement approach, as involving affected communities in decision-making fosters platforms for open dialogue. This engagement not only helps to better justify the relevance of humanitarian assistance - especially in contexts where its effectiveness is frequently questioned - but also enhances transparency and (ideally) builds trust between humanitarian personnel and the affected communities. Given this, community-driven platforms are essential for addressing concerns about the effectiveness of aid and for ensuring that assistance adapts to meet the needs of the affected populations.

Our final discussion Chapter delves deeper into this argument by analyzing the Afghanistan Community Voices and Accountability Platform, utilizing data from the 2023 Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Afghanistan Working Group. For such Platforms to be effective, it is crucial that affected communities trust the process and believe that their feedback will lead to meaningful change. When designed and implemented correctly, these mechanisms can enhance transparency, facilitate more accurate assessments, and enable necessary adjustments to aid programs, ultimately resulting in more effective humanitarian assistance. However, challenges such as fear of retaliation or dissatisfaction with inadequate responses can undermine honest feedback and compromise the overall effectiveness of aid programs.

Additionally, we identified challenges with accessing complaint tools, such as the difficulties posed by limited internet access in certain areas, and the lack of communities' understanding of human rights, which is necessary to hold organizations and governmental bodies accountable. Our investigation underscores the need for providing accurate information and ensuring the widespread availability of safe complaint mechanisms. Precise information is essential for effectively coordinating humanitarian responses and ensuring aid reaches those in need. It helps communities stay informed about distribution sites, safety measures, and specific benefits for vulnerable groups. Feedback from the Community Voices and Accountability Platform highlights the communities' concerns about these issues within the specific context of Afghanistan.

It is noteworthy that Afghanistan provides valuable insights into ongoing debates about aid response, shaped by over two decades of international aid dependency and the criticisms it has

generated. Our investigation examines the country's geopolitical and socio-cultural particularities alongside its humanitarian needs. Despite extensive international intervention - including peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian efforts - Afghanistan remains one of the most severe contemporary humanitarian crises. The current security situation further exposes the limitations of western-led interventions, as evidenced by the rapid rise of the Taliban as the De-facto Authorities in 2021. This case study supports our investigation by highlighting the constraints of a liberal-democratic approach to non-western, non-state armed conflicts. It raises critical questions for humanitarian actors regarding the need for more context-specific aid responses and challenges the suitability of new humanitarianism for today's complex emergencies in this (and similar) region. Additionally, it prompts a reevaluation of whether the humanitarian system should continue evolving or revert to classical approaches focused solely on relief operations, potentially sidelining human rights advocacy and development or peacebuilding efforts.

The results from the Afghanistan Community and Accountability Platform, specifically, the feedback comprises 2,010 responses in the first quarter (Q1 – January to March 2023), 4,282 in the second quarter (Q2 – April to June 2023), 10,005 in the third quarter (Q3 – July to September 2023), and 29,294 in the fourth quarter (Q4 – October to December 2023), consistently highlights a growing need for assistance in the country. For instance, while communities acknowledge and appreciate the aid provided, they also express concerns that 'the quality of assistance is not good and/or does not meet the basic needs of the affected people' (UNFPA, 2024, n.d.).

In addition to that, Q2 emphasizes that 'ongoing humanitarian programs should be tailored to the needs and priorities of the affected communities' (UNFPAb, 2024, n.d.). While community-based approaches are promising, our research highlights significant challenges in effectively implementing and following up on the feedback provided. The data reveal a paradox: despite the efforts of aid projects in 2023 and previous years, they have frequently fallen short of meeting the humanitarian needs of the population. This raises a crucial question: why does this discrepancy persist? Although a community-based approach appears to be a promising direction for improving effectiveness, there is concern that the data collected by humanitarian organizations may not be adequately utilized. The risk is that this valuable information might be stored on a shared online platform but not actively used to address the identified needs and challenges faced by the communities.

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